

Look Out At Your Children:

The Superchild Motif in British Scientific Romance

by

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Abstract

Like the related figure of the superman, the superchild motif is found throughout the history of science fiction and scientific romance. As a 'superior' figure, the superchild destabilises age categories and subverts ideas of normative childhood. Works containing the motif draw on ideas of regeneration and transcendence to present children as the next stage in human evolution, or sometimes as aggressive successor species. The main aim of this dissertation is to find the commonalities between seemingly disparate portrayals of the superchild motif. I will first look at the motif's roots in evolutionary theory and the Edwardian cult of childhood, and will then trace its development by British writers of scientific romance throughout the first half of the twentieth century, looking at works by H.G. Wells, J.D Beresford, Olaf Stapledon, Arthur C. Clarke, and John Wyndham. I will conclude by considering the superchild motif in the separate tradition of American pulp fiction.

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Introduction

In *The Food of the Gods* (1904), H.G. Wells imagined a race of giant children created by a growth-inducing ‘boom food.’ Facing ever-increasing hostility from the government and the rest of adult society, the giant children decide to go to war with their tiny tormentors. In the novel’s final lines, on the cusp of a great battle, their leader recites their credo:

We fight not for ourselves but for growth . . . growth will conquer through us. That is the law of the spirit for ever more. . . To grow, and again – to grow . . . Till the Earth is no more than a footstool.¹

This quotation makes clear that the giant children are much more than just the by-product of a scientific discovery; they are agents for “the spirit,” a symbol for growth and change. The novel ends with a vision of the giant child caught in the beams of the adults’ searchlights:

For one instant he shone, looking up fearlessly into the starry deeps, mail-clad, young and strong, resolute and still. Then the light had passed, and he was no more than a great black outline against the starry sky – a great black outline that threatened with one mighty gesture the firmament of heaven and all its multitude of stars.²

¹ H.G. Wells, *The Food of the Gods* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 2017) p. 349.

² Ibid., p. 349.

With this final image - a child using Earth as a footstool and reaching for the stars - Wells introduced a new motif into scientific romance, that of the superchild. The giant children embody many of the themes and ideas that inform the motif in the subsequent depictions I will study in this dissertation. These include the regenerative capacity of children, their alliance with a progressive life-force, and the opportunities for transcendence these children make possible, which all might eventually detach humans from their worldly origins, and make them closer to gods threatening heaven.

In this dissertation I will trace the evolution of the superchild motif, detailing its significance for authors writing in the first half of the twentieth century. By emphasising the various strands of regeneration, progress, and transcendence to differing degrees, the authors of my chosen texts demonstrate the versatility of the superchild motif in a diverse array of interpretations. In *The Hampdenshire Wonder* (1911), J.D Beresford depicts an evolutionary ‘sport’ called Victor Stott, who is willed into being by his parents’ manipulation of the life-force. Beresford’s superchild is a poignantly lonely character, unable to fit into society because of his abnormally high intelligence. In contrast, Olaf Stapledon’s *Odd John* (1935) depicts a highly sociable superchild who is able to use his superior intelligence to gain anything he desires. Despite his material wealth, however, what Odd John is most interested in is achieving a spiritual transcendence. In *Childhood’s End* (1953), Arthur C. Clarke also emphasises the transcendent strand of the superchild motif, though on a grand scale, depicting every child under ten transcending matter and merging with a cosmic mind. Two novels by John Wyndham, *The Chrysalids* (1955) and *The Midwich Cuckoos* (1957), emphasise their superchildren’s connection to the life force, and explores their status as evolutionary threats and successor species. Finally, I examine a selection of stories and novels from the “Golden Age” of American pulps, including *Slan* (1940) and *More Than*

Human (1953), finding that the same themes of regeneration and transcendence present themselves in markedly different ways to the works by British authors.

The primary aim of this dissertation is to find the commonalities between these disparate portrayals of superchildren, to locate the shared set of meanings expressed by the superchild motif. As well as ideas of regeneration, progress, and transcendence, these texts play with established age roles and our conceptions of a normative child, dramatizing intergenerational conflict and raising questions of species identification. The next section will be devoted to exploring these shared themes, including essential characteristics common to all of the superchildren, as well as secondary characteristics observable in many, though not all, of them. I will then focus on the roots of the superchild motif and define some of the terms I am using, and give a fuller outline of the structure of this dissertation.

Characteristics of the superchild

The first essential trait of the superchild motif, common to all of my chosen texts, is the reversal of established age roles. In superchild texts it is often the children who have the power, not their parents, or any other representative of adult society. For example, the adult narrator in *The Hampdenshire Wonder* finds himself unable to keep up with Victor's stream of logic, and ends up concluding that "Here I was the child."¹ The adult narrator of *Odd John* is similarly quick to acknowledge the inverted power balance between himself and the superchild: "I was his slave . . . however much I might laugh at him and scold him, I secretly recognized him as a superior being."² Not all adults are as swift to realize their loss of power, and unwisely try to wrestle control from the superchildren. "'Talking to your elders like that,

¹ J. D. Beresford, *The Hampdenshire Wonder* (London: Penguin, 1937) p. 211.

² Olaf Stapledon, *Odd John* (London: Gollanz, 2012) p. 22.

you swollen-headed little upstart,”” a police officer in *The Midwich Cuckoos* says to a superchild. When he attempts to reassert his adult authority by beating the young upstart, he is struck down by a telekinetic disordering of his glands.³

The central rule in superchild texts, then, is adherence to an equation which could be written: *younger = more powerful*. This dynamic can be seen not only in the superchildren's interactions with adults, but also among themselves. Time and again in superchild texts, younger children are portrayed as possessing superior powers, and the older superchildren frequently defer to the greater wisdom or strength of their younger brethren. In *More Than Human*, to give just one example, the most powerful of the superchildren is the perpetual infant called 'Baby,' who acts as the brain for the composite being the superchildren are creating. All plans are run past the crib-bound Baby before being put into action, and none of the older superchildren would ever dream of arguing with him. This deference to the youngest members of a group is perhaps a logical extension of the superchild motif - it stands to reason that if children are more powerful than adults, then the younger children would be more powerful than the older ones.

Many of the texts directly correlate innocence, or the lack of experience, with greater potency when dramatizing this inverted power relationship. In *Childhood's End*, Clarke tells us that the younger sister of the first superchild to emerge would soon “pass her brother, for she had so much less to unlearn.”⁴ This is a clear expression of the conception of childhood that sees development towards maturity as a “fall from grace.” Westfahl tells us that “Western tradition has long honoured children as being purer and naturally better than adults because they have not yet been corrupted by worldly way,” a view famously expressed by

³ John Wyndham, *The Midwich Cuckoos* (London: Penguin, 2008) p. 183.

⁴ Arthur C. Clarke, *Childhood's End* (London: Tor, 1990) p. 204.

Romantics like Rousseau and Wordsworth around the end of the eighteenth-century.⁵ This honouring of children can also be found in Christian belief, where, sitting somewhat awkwardly alongside notions of Original Sin and the belief that children are born sinful, is the strain of thought that esteems children “as almost prelapsarian beings, closer to God than any adult can be.”⁶ In this view, to mature is to move away from the uncorrupted source of wisdom and power. Younger children are closer to the source, and are therefore less corrupted and more powerful.

This Romantic view of youth as a source of power was given some scientific credence in the early twentieth century by the theory of neoteny. As Westfahl says:

Neoteny – the retention of juvenile features into adulthood – is one key strategy in the advancement and improvement of species. The human race is the best example of the process. Our ancestors, the primates, are little more than overgrown baby rodents, and human beings are little more than overgrown baby chimpanzees: hairless, large-headed, and possessed with an undying spirit of playfulness.⁷

Neoteny, then, shows that youth can hold the keys to evolutionary power. This is a direct challenge to the older idea of recapitulation, which according to Gould, “ranks among the most influential ideas of late nineteenth-century science.”⁸ Recapitulation theory operates on

⁵ Gary Westfahl, “Introduction: Return to Innocence”, *Nursery Realms: Children in the Words of Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror*, eds. Gary Westfahl and George Slusser. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999) p. x.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. x.

⁷ Gary Westfahl, “The Genre That Evolved: On Science Fiction as Children's Literature”, *Foundation* (Winter 1994) <<https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.bham.ac.uk/docview/1312048068?accountid=8630>> [accessed 5 August 2019] p. 71.

⁸ Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: Norton, 1981) p. 114.

the premise that the development of a child re-enacts the entire evolution of our species; thus, the younger a child is, the further back along the evolutionary chain they are. Far from being repositories of uncorrupted wisdom, recapitulation holds that younger children are primitive, and must evolve up into adulthood. Neoteny, however, reverses the argument, offering up an empowering view of the young. As Gould says, “In the context of neoteny, it is ‘good’ – that is, advanced or superior – to retain the traits of childhood, to develop more slowly. Thus, superior groups retain their childlike characters as adults.”⁹ With the theory of neoteny in mind, Honeyman argues that children can be seen as “the vehicle for the improvement of the species – emblems of what we are striving for, whether consciously or not, to become.”¹⁰ The superchildren in my chosen texts embody this idea, representing a new, improved type of human who transcend our current limitations, and whose youth is the source of their evolutionary power.

A final display of neoteny in superchildren is related to their appearance. As Westfahl says:

Knowingly or not, science fiction writers have acknowledged the process of neoteny in envisioning the future evolution of humanity . . . the standard image of *homo superior* has been an overgrown foetus: completely bald, with a huge bulging head, diminutive body, and delicately thin arms and fingers.¹¹

⁹ Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man*, p. 120.

¹⁰ Susan Honeyman, “Mutiny by Mutation: Uses of Neoteny in Science Fiction”, *Children’s Literature in Education*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (December 2004) <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10583-004-6417-y>> [accessed 18 December 2018] p. 353.

¹¹ Gary Westfahl, “The Genre That Evolved,” p. 71.

The appearance of some, though not all, of the super children follow this pattern, and it can therefore be seen as a secondary characteristic in my chosen texts. Odd John is one example of a superchild with neotenous features. Throughout his life he looks younger than he is, and even at twenty-three he is described as being “more like a boy than a man.”¹² Another of his kind, an old female *Homo superior*, is described as possessing “a curious combination of the infantile, even foetal, with the mature.”¹³ This makes clear that Odd John and his kind retain their infant traits, and thus the source of their power, well into maturity.

Despite the above renderings of youth as a source of power, a surprising aspect of the superchildren I have studied is how *unchildlike* most of them are, in behaviour, if not in appearance. This is another central theme, but before giving examples from my chosen texts, it is first necessary to establish what childlike traits are in order to see how the superchildren deviate from them. John Holt has described a certain “cuteness” that we traditionally ascribe to a normative child, which acts as a good starting point:

We tend to think that children are most cute when they are openly displaying their ignorance and incompetence. We value their dependency and helplessness. They are help objects as well as love objects.¹⁴

Childlike traits, then, are related to the child’s reliance on adults for help. They are the qualities which give “us power over them and helps us to feel superior.”¹⁵ Added to these qualities are some of the ideas I have already mentioned in relation to the Romantic view of childhood, a view which emphasises children’s “innocence, purity, nonsexuality, goodness,

¹² Olaf Stapledon, *Odd John*, p. 3.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

¹⁴ John Holt, *Escape From Childhood*, (New York: E.P Dutton & Co., Inc., 1974) p. 120.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

spirituality, and wisdom.”¹⁶ Taken altogether, these traits give a reasonable description of normative childhood with which to compare the superchildren in my chosen texts.

A quick survey of the superchildren shows how far many of them are from the category of normative childhood. As I have already said, Victor Stott in *The Hampdenshire Wonder* is certainly not ignorant, intellectually outclassing all of the adults he interacts with. He is also described as having “absolute spiritual blindness,” and is devoid of “one spark of the imagination of a poet.”¹⁷ Odd John is equally intelligent, and has none of the ignorance or helplessness that allows adults to feel superior to him. Out of Holt’s list of other normative traits - “innocence, purity, nonsexuality, goodness, spirituality, and wisdom” - Odd John can only lay claim to the last two, as he commits a murder before he is ten and seduces a neighbour boy and his own mother shortly afterwards.¹⁸ In *Childhood’s End*, the superchildren are also devoid of the dependent traits associated with normative childhood. They instantly ignore their parents when they have begun their transformation, having moved “beyond their assistance, and beyond their love.”¹⁹ Likewise, within months of being born, the children in the *Midwich Cuckoos* are described as being the “most practical, sensible, self-contained babies anyone ever saw.”²⁰ By the time they are nine, the children are much closer to Holt’s description of adulthood, which he says is to be “cool, impassive, unconcerned, untouched, invulnerable.”²¹

However, there are a few exceptions to this rule. First, there are some of the very young children, who, as I mentioned earlier, often embody the wisdom of an uncorrupted childhood. Second, exceptions occur in works which are more explicitly aligned with their

¹⁶ John Holt, *Escape From Childhood*, p. 113.

¹⁷ J. D. Beresford, *The Hampdenshire Wonder*, p. 170.

¹⁸ John Holt, *Escape From Childhood*, p. 113.

¹⁹ Arthur C. Clarke, *Childhood’s End*, p. 209.

²⁰ John Wyndham, *The Midwich Cuckoos*, p. 114.

²¹ John Holt, *Escape From Childhood*, p. 113.

superchildren, where the child's helplessness is used as a way of gaining sympathy for the young characters. In *The Chrysalids*, for example, the superchildren have no special intelligence that sets them apart, and they rely on their parents to the same extent as normative children. Unfortunately for them, their parents are particularly intolerant of difference, which makes the superchildren's helplessness all the more likely to provoke sympathy. As the children move towards adolescence, and their powers of telepathy develop, they become increasingly frustrated with the adults: "It called for a lot of restraint to remain silent in the face of simple errors, to listen patiently to silly arguments based on misconceptions, to do a job in the customary way when one knew there was a better way..."²² In this way, the superchildren's movement away from their dependency on their parents is analogous to the movement encountered in normative children as they approach adolescence. This pattern can also be observed in *Slan*.

Despite these exceptions, it is clear that the overwhelming majority of the superchildren in my chosen texts display little of the innocence, ignorance, and dependency we expect in normative children. In most cases, the behaviour of the superchildren removes them from the category of "child" altogether, regardless of their appearance. The effects of this category displacement are two-fold. In the first instance, it helps the writers to convince us of their character's superiority from the very start, and so the ground is well prepared for any later disclosures about their status as a new kind of human, or, in some cases, a new species. For example, Odd John manages to confound a professor of mathematics when he is only five years old, a sure sign that his intelligence goes beyond the ordinary. The reader is therefore prepared for Stapledon's revelation that Odd John is a *Homo superior*.

²² John Wyndham, *The Chrysalids* (London: Penguin, 2010) p. 80.

Secondly, by not having their superchildren conform to our usual ideas of what a child should be, the writers are able to create uniquely unsettling figures. John Holt described this effect well in a discussion about the child prodigies of the past:

When we read about what we call the precocity of some children of earlier times, we are sceptical, often deeply threatened. The very words “precocity” and “precocious” sound like the names of diseases. They betray our feelings that most children could not possibly have done such things and that a child who could and did must have been something of a freak. Many are so used to a sentimental and condescending view of children that when they hear of a child of four speaking Latin and Greek they feel *a kind of horror* (italics mine).²³

The threatening aspect of precocity that Holt describes is taken to the extreme in a number of my chosen texts, and used expressly for the purposes of chilling the reader. Perhaps the best example of this is *The Midwich Cuckoos*. Here Wyndham uses the unsettling nature of the children as a way of heightening the children’s status as an evolutionary threat, instilling in the reader the kind of creeping dread more often associated with the horror genre. Another example is Jerome Bixby’s short story, “It’s a *Good* Life,” which also uses a precocious child to instil a feeling of horror.

Altogether, there is something of a paradox at the heart of the superchild motif. On the one hand, the superchild adheres to the *younger=more powerful* principle, which equates innocence and youth with superiority. On the other hand, the unchildlike behaviour of the

²³ John Holt, *Escape From Childhood*, p. 93.

superchildren frequently displaces them from the category of childhood altogether. Or, to put it another way, the children are powerful because they are young, but they are often unchildlike because they are powerful. This paradox represents a profound destabilising of adult conceptions around age roles, and a denial of the expected patterns of intergenerational behaviour. In superchild stories, preconceptions about age are built on shifting sands. More often than not, adults end up helpless, and children become precocious figures of power.

Another paradox that helps define the superchild motif is provided by Carl Jung's exploration of the child in myth. In "The Psychology of the Child Archetype" (1985), Jung describes the child in myth as "all that is abandoned and exposed and at the same time divinely powerful; the insignificant, dubious beginning, and the triumphal end."²⁴ This paradox emerges from a set of patterns Jung found in myths, and as many of the superchildren in my chosen texts also follow these patterns, his observations are worth exploring. According to Jung, the essential feature of the child motif in myth is "its futurity. The child is potential future."²⁵ The same is true for the superchild motif. Almost all of the superchildren I have studied are portrayed as being the next step in human evolution, or else a successor species poised to take over from *Homo sapiens*. In either case, the superchildren represents nothing less than the potential future of the entire human race.

Furthermore, the child in myth often "possesses powers far exceeding those of ordinary humanity."²⁶ This is also true for the superchildren, who, by definition, are more powerful than ordinary humanity. These powers can take several forms. As I have already mentioned, greater intelligence is common among the superchildren in my chosen texts, though super strength is also a feature in some novels, such as *Slan* and *Odd John*. The power

²⁴ C.G Jung, "The Psychology of the Child Archetype", *Science of Mythology, Essays on the Myth of the Divine Child and the Mysteries of Eleusis*, by Jung, C.G and Kerenyi, C. (London: ARK, 1985) p. 98.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 83.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 89.

of telepathy also crops up frequently in my selected superchild texts, with eight out of the ten stories I have studied featuring it in some form.

According to Jung, the infancy of the child in myth is frequently marked by “abandonment and danger through persecution,” with the child being “delivered helpless into the power of terrible enemies and in continual danger of extinction.”²⁷ This also finds echoes in my chosen texts. Abandonment, especially by the father, features in several of these works, including *The Hampdenshire Wonder* and *The Midwich Cuckoos*. The threat of persecution also recurs, and the superchildren in *The Chrysalids*, *Slan*, *The Hampdenshire Wonder*, *Odd John* and the *Midwich Cuckoos* all face persecution by the ordinary humans they are born into the midst of.

Another pattern that Jung describes concerns the loneliness of the child. According to Jung, “Higher consciousness, or knowledge going beyond our present day consciousness, is equivalent to being *all alone in the world*” (italics in original).²⁸ This loneliness is evident in many of my chosen texts. Where the superchildren are mentally superior to ordinary humanity, and possess “knowledge going beyond our present day consciousness,” they frequently have trouble communicating with lower intellects. This isolates them, as evidenced by Victor in *The Hampdenshire Wonder*, who is “entirely alone among aliens who were unable to comprehend him, aliens who could not flatter him, whose opinions were valueless to him.”²⁹ Other superchildren, such as Jommy in *Slan*, may have loneliness forced upon them by the necessity of staying hidden to avoid the persecution mentioned above. Some of the super children form groups with others of their kind, but the loneliness does not necessarily cease. The superchildren in *More Than Human*, for example, form a tight knit group which eventually becomes a single being, but for most of the novel their group is a

²⁷ C.G Jung, “The Psychology of the Child Archetype,” p. 87 and p. 85.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 88.

²⁹ J.D. Beresford, *The Hampdenshire Wonder*, p. 223.

small one, and there remains a sense that they are still “*all alone in the world.*” A psychologist tells the leader of the group as much: ““You *and* the kids are a single creature. Unique. Unprecedented.” He pointed his pipe at me. “*Alone*”” (italics in original).³⁰

The final aspect of the child in myth which Jung highlights is the idea of them being “*renatus in novam infantiam,*” or “reborn into a new infancy.”³¹ The child in myth is “both beginning and end, an initial and a terminal creature.”³² In terms of the superchild motif, this idea is often expressed in an evolutionary context. As I have said, the children are frequently the beginning of a new form of humanity, a new form yet in its infancy, but, at the same time, they represent the end of the previous form, that is to say, *us*. The superchildren in these stories are the future, which necessarily make *Homo sapiens* a thing of the past. This is particularly true in *Childhood’s End*, where the transcendence of the world’s children destroys the Earth itself, along with anything left alive on it.

These are the patterns which give rise to the paradox of the child being “all that is abandoned and exposed and at the same time divinely powerful; the insignificant, dubious beginning, and the triumphal end.”³³ This one sentence of Jung’s captures the character and progression of many of the superchildren I have studied, and I will have cause to return to it throughout this dissertation.

To avoid the hostility that Jung noted, or at least mitigate it until they reach maturity, many of the superchildren disguise themselves, going through what Miller has defined as a “cuckoo phase.” According to Miller, this occurs “in works in which the alien arises from within the parent species, [where] the survival of the mutant child, whether slant, *Homo*

³⁰ Theodore Sturgeon, *More Than Human* (London: Gollancz, 2003) p. 145.

³¹ C.G Jung, “The Psychology of the Child Archetype,” p. 97.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 97.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

Gestalt, or Odd John, depends initially on its ability to pass as human.”³⁴ The superchildren who employ this strategy in my chosen texts have varying degrees of success. Some, such as Jommy Cross in *Slan* and the children in *The Chrysalids*, manage to remain hidden until their powers are developed enough for them to no longer fear a threat, while others, such as the Children in *The Midwich Cuckoos*, are not so lucky. Miller tells us that “once the mutant comes into its powers, the cuckoo phase typically ends.”³⁵ Instead of hiding, a superchild who has survived to adolescence must use a different set of strategies.

Miller describes these strategies in relation to primate societies. When male primates reach adolescence, one of two things happen - either they leave the troop or they fight for a place in its hierarchy. If they win the fight, they gain a place, perhaps even toppling the alpha male and claiming the top spot; if they lose, they are banished from the troop.³⁶ As Miller says, “the mutant in science fiction is a metaphor for the adolescent, and all the evolutionary strategies known for dealing with competitive offspring are abundantly evident.”³⁷ This is borne out by a quick survey of the superchildren I am studying. Some, such as Odd John, and the children in *The Chrysalids* and *The Midwich Cuckoos*, attempt to leave society before they bring down the wrath of the patriarch, represented either by the biological father or the government. As with the cuckoo phase, the superchildren have varying levels of success with this strategy – in *The Chrysalids*, the children manage to escape the clutches of the patriarch (with a little help from another supernormal), while Odd John and the Children in *The Midwich Cuckoos* are forcefully stopped. Other superchildren, such as Jommy in *Slan*, fight for a place in the hierarchy, eventually winning a top spot.

³⁴ Joseph D. Miller, “The Child as Alien,” *Nursery Realms: Children in the Words of Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror*, eds. Gary Westfahl and George Slusser (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999) p. 94.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

As a final note on this subject, Miller tells us that it is very rare in science fiction texts for the adolescent to kill the father: “science fiction blinks at the Oedipal act. . . It is allowable to overthrow, destroy, and kill all representatives of imperial/paternal authority *except* the biological father.”³⁸ This too is borne out by the superchildren in my chosen texts. In the few cases where the father *is* killed, such as in *The Chrysalids*, it is by someone other than the superchild themselves.

What’s clear from Miller’s observations is that the superchild is not only a symbol of a new man, it is also as a symbol of inter-generational conflict. I argue that the inter-generational conflict on display in these texts has its roots in two things. Firstly, there is the unknowability of the child. Even the most ordinary child, who fits in to the normative ideal, still inhabits a world just beyond our reach, a world adults have forgotten how to enter. While this other world can be tantalizing, it can also cause a sense of unease. Bick tells us that parents:

attempt continually to integrate their children into the familiar, as underscored by such statements as “He has your eyes,” or “She has my nose.” . . . In this way, parents grapple with the unknown quantity which *is* the child, rendering him more familiar and less threatening, by appropriating various physical characteristics.³⁹

This impulse to “integrate their children into the familiar” can be seen a symptom of the fear parents feel about their child’s unknown potential. The superchild motif takes the fear to the

³⁸ Joseph D. Miller, “The Child as Alien,” pp. 95-96.

³⁹ Isla J. Bick, “Aliens Among Us: A Representation of Children in Science Fiction,” *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (June 1, 1989) p. 741, <<https://doi.org/10.1177/000306518903700308> > [accessed 15 October 2018].

extreme, heightening the innate unknowability of a child by making them more intelligent, or blessed with powers that their parents don't possess. This fear can also be seen in the folktale of the Changeling Child. As Fiedler says:

That legend projects the disturbing sense, surely felt from time to time by all parents, that the babe in one's arms, the adolescent across the table are hostile strangers, destined eventually to betray or abandon the troubled mortals who have fostered them.⁴⁰

As well as touching on the unknowability of the child, Fiedler also hints towards the second source of inter-generational conflict, which is the adults' fear of obsolescence. As Reynolds and Yates say: "Children represent the future. . . Just as importantly, however, children signify adults' obsolescence . . . their purpose in life is to replace their parents."⁴¹ Again, this is an idea that the superchildren of science fiction take to the extreme. As well as threatening to replace their parents in the usual, biological sense, they threaten to replace their entire parent species. Like the Changeling Child, they will betray and abandon their parents, fating them to obsolescence.

Thus intergenerational conflict in superchild texts is frequently analogous to interspecies conflict. As such, they raise questions for the reader about how far we can really sympathise with a new race of men who will one day wipe us out. Almost all of my chosen texts play with this question, and come to different answers. Stableford tells us that many writers of scientific romance were "harshly critical of the contemporary human condition and

⁴⁰ Leslie A. Fiedler, *Olaf Stapledon, A Man Divided* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983.), p. 103.

⁴¹ Kimberley Reynolds and Paul Yates, "Too Soon: Representations of Childhood Death in Literature for Children," *Children in Culture: Approaches to Childhood*, ed, Karin Lesnik-Oberstein (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998) p. 152.

wholly in favour of ‘progress.’”⁴² Subsequently, stories such as *Odd John* and *The Food of the Gods* suggest that the writer is impatient to get rid of humanity as it is constituted and replace it with something better, thus eliciting sympathy for the superchild at the expense of our own species. Others give the question very little thought. For example, in *Slan*, “the problem of what to do with human beings” is dealt with in a couple of sentences, with van Vogt giving no real ideas except for saying that it must be “settled with justice and psychological sanity.”⁴³ John Wyndham’s novels have a different approach, seeing their superchildren as a danger that must be fought, a Darwinian threat to our existence.

One way around this problem of species identification, which writers such as Clarke and Sturgeon employ, is making the superchildren appear part of a divine plan. Stableford notes that many stories dealing with superhumans evoke “religious notions of transcendence and personal salvation,” and in “extreme cases it comes to resemble an apotheosis.”⁴⁴ Thus the ending of *Childhood’s End*, while tragic in some ways, also contains a sense of humans reaching their full potential. This is a much less threatening state of affairs than an invasion of arrogant usurpers convinced of their own superiority, which is how the novel begins.

Of course, if we decide the superchildren *are* threatening, their adoption of a cuckoo phase makes it hard for us to act against them. There might be few moral sanctions against killing a slobbering alien, but killing a child is much more difficult. Thus, superchild stories can often be fraught with ambiguity. The reader must make up their own minds as to where their sympathies lie, with their parent species, or with the young usurpers.

⁴² Brian M Stableford, “Superman”, *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, ed. John Clute, David Langford, Peter Nicholls and Graham Sleight (London: Gollanz, updated 8 May 2015) Web: <<http://www.sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/superman>> [accessed 26 November 2018].

⁴³ A.E. van Vogt, *Slan*, (London: Panther, 1985) p. 53.

⁴⁴ Brian M Stableford, “Superman”, *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*.

The superman as transcendent figure

As I have shown in the preceding pages, the superchild motif has its own distinct set of themes, patterns, and paradoxes. However, it is still intimately related to the superman theme, acting as an oft-overlooked younger brother to its better known sibling.

Gillespie traces the origins of the superman figure back to the Romantics, who drew on figures such as Milton's Satan and Prometheus, plus real-world examples like Napoleon, to imagine "titanic individuals" who act as a "decisive force in world history."¹ In the nineteenth century, buttressed by science and the theory of evolution, the possibility of a superman was seen as less of a literary dream, and more of an "inevitable consequence of the operation of the laws of nature."² Into this context Nietzsche published *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883–1891), in which he outlined the figure of *Übermensch*. For Nietzsche, the death of God had left European civilization facing two paths. One path led towards the last man, so called because it is the last stop before the beasts, while the other path led in the direction of the *Übermensch*. Nietzsche's ideas about the superman, or overman as it is sometimes translated, have not always been understood correctly, and his work has suffered from multiple misinterpretations and literal readings over the years. Nevertheless, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* helped to popularize the notion of a superman as a symbolic representation of man's highest possibilities, which Edwardian writers such as George Bernard Shaw carried forward into the twentieth century.

Science fiction, in particular, abounded with supermen in the twentieth century.

Whether created by science, sudden mutation, or long evolutionary processes, the supermen

¹ Michael Allen Gillespie, "'Slouching Toward Bethlehem to Be Born': On the Nature and Meaning of Nietzsche's Superman," *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, No.30 (Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 2005) p. 50. <doi:10.1353/nie.2005.0011> [accessed 19 November 2018].

² Ibid., p. 50.

in science fiction were usually “‘better’ than we are at those skills that ‘we’ think matter most.”³ Thus, super-speed, super-strength, and super-intelligence are common in these stories. In the case of the latter:

Superintelligence is often pictured going along with what seems to ordinary humans a cold indifference and a casual amorality. Perhaps this demonstrates a sour-grapes syndrome. We do not like the thought of being relegated to a minor place in the evolutionary scheme; and, as evolution is traditionally carried out by a ‘Nature red in tooth and claw’, we half expect that a race of geniuses would treat us cruelly.⁴

This amorality is not only a feature of science fiction supermen, but can be seen throughout the history of the character. Even in the Romantic accounts Gillespie talked of, what mattered “was greatness, and not goodness . . . these titanic individuals were morally ambiguous at best.”⁵ These stories imply that moving beyond normal *Homo sapiens* necessarily entails moving beyond the morality that governs us. To be a superhuman is to be free of normal human restraints, whether our limited brain capacity or our moral codes.

That is not to say that all supermen in science fiction are amoral monsters. This is proved by the conventions of the superhero in comic books, who often follow a higher moral code. Many non-comic book writers have also imagined the supermen as representing a

³ Stephen R.L. Clark, *How to Live Forever, Science Fiction and Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 103.

⁴ Peter Nicholls and David Langford, “Intelligence”, *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, ed. John Clute, David Langford, Peter Nicholls and Graham Sleight (London: Gollanz, updated 25 December 2017) <<http://www.sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/intelligence>> [accessed 11 December 2018].

⁵ Michael Allen Gillespie, “Slouching Toward Bethlehem to Be Born”, p. 50.

“better and saner breed of humans.”⁶ This is also an outcome of being free from the limits of normal humans – in this case, from the pettiness and aggression that often marks our lives. As I have already mentioned, Stableford tells us that the idea of the superman “has always been entangled with religious notions of transcendence and personal salvation.”⁷ The superman, then, is someone who transcends the current state of humanity and captures some of the wisdom and power of a god.

All of the above is useful in better understanding the superchild motif. The “cold indifference and a casual amorality” that Nicholls and Langford noted in abnormally intelligent supermen features in texts like *Odd John* and *The Midwich Cuckoos*, and the idea of the supermen being a “better and saner breed of humans” chimes with superchild texts like *The Crystals*, among others. Furthermore, as I mentioned at the beginning, the idea of transcending the limitations of humanity as it is currently configured is often at the heart of the superchild motif.

For all their similarities, I have shown that the superchild motif is more than just a facsimile of the superman in smaller form. It plays with a host of other ideas, many of which relate to our conceptions of a normative child. While drawing on Romantic ideas of innocence, and the greater wisdom of children, it also presents children who are unchildlike and unsettling. It heightens the essential unknowability of a child, and in doing so, presents an extreme version of a child’s status as a usurper, or replacement.

Now I have given a broad definition of the superchild motif, I will turn to looking deeper into the roots of the superchild motif. These roots can be found, like so much of science fiction, in the fertile imaginative ground laid by evolutionary theory.

⁶ Brian M Stableford and David Langford, “Mutants”, *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, ed. John Clute, David Langford, Peter Nicholls and Graham Sleight (London: Gollanz, updated 12 August 2018) <<http://www.sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/mutant>> [accessed 27 November 2018].

⁷ Brian M Stableford, “Superman”, *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*.

Evolutionary theory and the cult of childhood.

Evolution is central to much in science fiction. As Stableford and Langford say: “in a culture without an evolutionary philosophy most of the kinds of fiction we categorize as sf could not develop.”¹ This is no less true for the superchild motif. Evolutionary theory is a tangled field, however, and to untangle all of these knots is beyond the scope of this dissertation. Therefore, I will focus on the particular strands that are most relevant to my discussion of the superchild, briefly introducing each topic and explaining how it relates to my wider discussion. The strands that I have identified are: social Darwinism, ideas of progress, and the response of Edwardian intellectuals to late-Victorian fears of degeneration, in particular the “cult of childhood” which emerged in the Edwardian era.

Darwin’s focus in the *Origin of the Species* was upon the biological evolution of nonhuman animals, but Paul tells us within a month of its publication “debate focused on the implications of Darwin’s theory for human biological and social progress.”² One manifestation of this is social Darwinism, which applied theories of natural selection and the “survival of the fittest” to human societies. As Draper tells us:

Darwin’s work was used to justify a startlingly wide range of approaches to ethic and politics - individualism, Marxism, imperialism, nationalism, *laissez-faire* capitalism, racism - each of which, by applying the ‘survival of

¹ Brian M Stableford and David Langford, “Evolution”, *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, ed. John Clute, David Langford, Peter Nicholls and Graham Sleight (London: Gollanz, updated 11 August 2018) Web: <<http://www.sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/evolution>> [accessed 26 November 2018]

² Diane B. Paul, “Darwin, social Darwinism and eugenics,” *The Cambridge Companion to Darwin*, eds. Jonathan Hodge, Gregory Radick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 220.

the fittest' idea in a different way, appeared to vindicate its own peculiar presuppositions.³

Herbert Spencer is one of the key figures in the history of social Darwinism. It was Spencer, and not Darwin, who had coined the phrase “survival of the fittest,” which he saw as a natural mechanism for eliminating inferior members of a population, assuring the survival of those best able to adapt to life.⁴ Spencer also believed that evolution was synonymous with progress, and that the end goal of evolution was a society where free-market competition and individual freedom ran things, without the need for government intervention.⁵

Social Darwinist ideas, drawing from Herbert Spencer and others, became comingled with British imperial rhetoric about ‘civilized’ versus ‘primitive’ people. For some imperialists, Darwinism was proof that “nature enjoined the powerful (white, Christian, British, male) to dominate.”⁶ Also of relevance to these attitudes was the theory of recapitulation, which, as I mentioned earlier, operates on the premise that the development of a child re-enacts the entire evolution of our species. According to Gould, this theory offered an “irresistible criterion for any scientist who wanted to rank human groups as higher and lower.”⁷ As Gould says:

Despised groups had been compared with children before, but the theory of recapitulation gave this old chestnut the respectability of main-line

³ Michael Draper, *H. G. Wells* (London: MacMillan, 1987) p. 18.

⁴ Naomi Beck, "Social Darwinism," *The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of Darwin and Evolutionary Thought*, ed. Michael Ruse (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013), p. 196.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

⁶ Anne-Barbara Graff, “‘Administrative Nihilism’: Evolution, Ethics and Victorian Utopian Satire,” *Utopian Studies*, Vol.12, No.2 (2001) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/20718314>> [accessed 31 July 2019] p. 34.

⁷ Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man*, p. 115.

scientific theory. ‘They’re like children’ was no longer just a metaphor of bigotry; it now embodied a theoretical claim that inferior people were literally mired in an ancestral stage of superior groups.⁸

The legacy of social Darwinism and theory of recapitulation, then, is the idea that people, and whole societies, can be scientifically measured on a sliding scale, with ‘superior’ types at the top, and ‘inferior’ at the bottom, and what is more, that the biological destiny of those at the top is to rule, educate, or exterminate those at the bottom.

Many of the ideas of social Darwinism and recapitulation can be seen in my chosen superchild texts, as is perhaps to be expected of a motif that so often elicits ideas of ‘superior’ and ‘inferior’ humans. In some texts, references to the racist, imperialist readings of social Darwinism and recapitulation are explicit, such as when the narrator of *The Hampdenshire Wonder* calls himself “an undeveloped animal, only one stage higher than a totem-fearing savage” in comparison to Victor.⁹ The narrator thus sees himself as part of a chain, and just as he believes that the “savage” occupies a lower evolutionary stage than him, so he too occupies a lower evolutionary stage than Victor. Other works might not state the ideas so explicitly, but they are implicit within them. Odd John, for example, believes himself to be of a separate species from *Homo sapiens* altogether, and the fact that he calls his species *Homo superior* leaves little room for doubt as to the relative positions of the two species. Likewise, both of John Wyndham’s novels operate on the basis of competition between a ‘superior’ group of children and the ‘inferior’ humanity they are born amongst. Bould and Vint argue that the ending of *The Crysalds* especially “reeks of social Darwinism.”¹⁰ The biological

⁸ Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man*, p. 116.

⁹ J.D Beresford, *The Hampdenshire Wonder*, p. 221.

¹⁰ Mark Bould and Sherryl Vint, *The Routledge Concise History of Science Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2011) p. 94.

destiny of the ‘superior’ type to rule over ‘inferior’ humans is also present in *Slan*, as evidenced by the slan leader’s speech: “What more natural than that we should insinuate our way into control of the human government? Are we not the most intelligent beings on the face of the Earth?”¹¹

The only group of superchildren in my chosen texts who directly refute such thinking are the children who make up the *Homo gestalt* in Sturgeon’s *More Than Human*. When a psychologist asks if the superchildren felt they were better than the rest of the world, one of them replies: “Different, yes. Better, no.”¹² The rightness of this view is later confirmed by another supernormal when the children transcend. *More Than Human* thus stands as one of the very few superchild works that places their superchildren alongside current humanity, rather than above it.

The ideas of social Darwinism, recapitulation, and the renderings of a ‘superior’ human in my chosen texts, are all intimately related to the idea of progress. Ruse tells us that in Darwin’s day the belief that evolution was progressive was widespread, and remained so into the early twentieth century, though nowadays, with a few exceptions, most evolutionary biologists deny the idea that evolution leads to biological progress.¹³ Despite these doubts, when it comes to human evolution there has been a lingering sense that the next step beyond “‘us’ must be ‘better’ than we are at those skills that ‘we’ think matter most.”¹⁴ This is borne out by the ways in which the superchildren are superior to ordinary humans. Intelligence, for example, is a well-regarded trait among humans, and so someone who is ‘better’ than us would therefore be more intelligent, as are Victor in *The Hampdenshire Wonder* and Odd John. Likewise, communication skills are highly prized in our society, and the telepathic

¹¹ A.E van Vogt, *Slan*, p. 150

¹² Theodore Sturgeon, *More Than Human*, p. 116

¹³ Michael Ruse, *The Philosophy of Human Evolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) p. 111.

¹⁴ Stephen R.L. Clark, *How to Live Forever, Science Fiction and Philosophy*, p. 103.

abilities which are widespread in superchildren are, in a sense, a ‘better’ means of communication. Progress is therefore at the heart of the superchild motif, and the fact that the children are more advanced than current humanity is often the central conceit in the texts I am studying.

Running alongside the idea of evolution as a progressive force, however, is a contrasting fear of decline. Paul tells us that “Darwin and many of his followers thought selection no longer acted in modern society, for the weak of mind and body are not culled. This raised a prospect of degeneration that worried people of all political stripes.”¹⁵ Rose argues that this fear of racial degeneration was compounded in the late nineteenth century by the decline in traditional morality provided by religion:

Without God, the universe lost all coherence and purpose in the minds of many late Victorians. Rationalist materialism, carried to its furthest extreme, led to the conclusion that all things, including man himself, were mere temporary collections of free atoms, with no guiding spirit giving them direction, unity, and permanence.¹⁶

The emergence of the Decadent movement in the 1890s did little to console late Victorians worried about the loss of morality or degeneration. The Decadent belief in ‘art for art’s sake,’ and their emphasis on artificiality and eroticism “seemed to signify a society and culture threatened to its core with decline and decay.”¹⁷

¹⁵ Diane B. Paul, “Darwin, social Darwinism and eugenics,” p. 220.

¹⁶ Jonathan Rose, *The Edwardian Temperament 1895-1919* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1986) p. 2.

¹⁷ Carolyn Burdett, “Aestheticism and decadence,” *British Library website* (15 Mar 2014). <<https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/aestheticism-and-decadence>> [accessed: 20 July 2019]

In reaction to this fear of decline, and to fill the vacuum left by the loss of religion, Rose argues that Edwardian thinkers attempted a reconciliation between “faith and reason, merging the two into a higher and broader synthesis.”¹⁸ This led to the creation of what he calls “secular faiths,” which took a number of forms.¹⁹ For some, the empirical research into phenomenon such as mental telepathy and ESP became a way of reconciling religious experience with science. Others, influenced by Samuel Butler and the French philosopher Henri Bergson, celebrated a mystical Life Force, which combined evolutionary theory with spirituality. While both of these secular faith appear in superchild texts, perhaps the most important secular faith for the purposes of this essay is the Edwardian cult of childhood.

According to Gavin and Humphries, childhood in the Edwardian period “was a subject of deep concern, fascination, and even obsession.”²⁰ One result of this obsession was a new concern for child welfare. In *The Children of the Nation: How Their Health and Vigour Should Be Promoted by the State* (1906), J.E. Gorst wrote that children “will form the future British people; and upon their condition and capacity will depend not only the happiness of our country but also the influence of our Empire in the world.”²¹ Thus, children, as the future masters of Britain and its Empire, were burdened with the adults’ hopes for the future, and charged with rejuvenating a society that was emerging from its posited phase of late-Victorian decadence and decline. The Edwardian era saw an unprecedented increase in state involvement in the lives of children, which led to parliamentary acts like the creation of a national education system in 1902, to give just one example.

¹⁸ Jonathan Rose, *The Edwardian Temperament 1895-1919*, p. 3.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

²⁰ Adrienne E. Gavin and Andrew F. Humphries, “Worlds Enough and Time: The Cult of Childhood in Edwardian Fiction,” *Childhood in Edwardian Fiction: Worlds Enough and Time*, ed. Adrienne E. Gavin and Andrew F. Humphries (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) p. 1

²¹ J. E. Gorst, *The Children of the Nation: How Their Health and Vigour Should Be Promoted by the State*, (London: Methuen & CO, 1906) p. 1.

The legal and scientific quest to provide better welfare for children also took on religious aspects. The educator Maria Montessori, for example, wrote that “We must have faith in the child as a messiah, as a saviour capable of regenerating the human race and society.”²² This quote reflects much more than just the hope for a better future through our children. It also reflects “a need for unburdening ourselves through (blind) faith in their wiser power.”²³ Children, then, while becoming the object of intense empirical scrutiny, had also become another object of an Edwardian secular faith.

This faith in the superior wisdom of children is evident in much of the literature produced during the Edwardian era. The early twentieth-century saw a boom in literature for, and about, children, with writers such as J.M Barrie and E. Nesbit depicting children “as separate from, superior to, and unadulterated by both adults and modern civilization.”²⁴ This marks a break from the Victorian model of childhood, where adults, in the form of parents, teachers or religious leaders, maintained strict control:

“While Victorian literature depicted the power balance being weighted heavily in adult’s favour, Edwardian fiction reveals the scales swinging triumphantly towards a child power base. There is a clear sense that it is not Father, but children, who know best. Fictional children are presented as independent, imaginative, troubling, mischievous, at one with nature and

²² Maria Montessori, quoted in Susan Honeyman, “Mutiny by Mutation: Uses of Neoteny in Science Fiction,” p. 359.

²³ Susan Honeyman, “Mutiny by Mutation: Uses of Neoteny in Science Fiction,” p. 359

²⁴ Adrienne E. Gavin, “Unadulterated Childhood: The Child in Edwardian Fiction,” *The Child in British Literature*, ed. Adrienne E. Gavin (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 166.

the supernatural, and, above all, as ‘better’ and more self-assured than adults.”²⁵

The ‘otherness’ of the child is a crucial aspect of the secular faith surrounding children. In contrast to childhood in Victorian literature, which was an often dangerous and painful phase that had to be passed through to reach productive adulthood, for the Edwardians, childhood was a world unto itself, a world of “play and adventure, neo-Romantic connection to nature, imaginative vision, and timelessness.”²⁶ The Edwardians idealized and desired this other world, seeing it as a “palliative to the rushing mechanized city and a scientific age.”²⁷ This ‘otherness’ is also a factor in the science based programme for moulding the future generation. Honeyman tells us that the empirical, developmental view “might allow the possibility of child learning (as opposed to the romantic construction of innocent wisdom), but it still situates child experience as distinctly different – a tantalizing otherness and curious target of analysis.”²⁸ Overall, then, the picture which emerges from the Edwardian era is of the child as ‘other,’ who not only constitutes a regenerative hope for the future, but, in some cases, is an almost God-like figure of wisdom and power. These are the ideas at the heart of the superchild motif. Their greater power and wisdom represents a progressive regeneration of the species, and they offer the hope for transcending our current limitations.

²⁵ Adrienne E. Gavin and Andrew F. Humphries, “Worlds Enough and Time: The Cult of Childhood in Edwardian Fiction,” p. 11.

²⁶ Adrienne E. Gavin, “Unadulterated Childhood: The Child in Edwardian Fiction,” p. 166.

²⁷ Adrienne E. Gavin and Andrew F. Humphries, “Worlds Enough and Time: The Cult of Childhood in Edwardian Fiction,” p. 9.

²⁸ Susan Honeyman, “Mutiny by Mutation: Uses of Neoteny in Science Fiction,” p351.

The influence of H.G. Wells and scientific romance

I will return now to the influence of H.G Wells, whose work brings together all of the themes and ideas discussed in this chapter. Not only is his primacy in the development of the superchild motif an important factor for the purposes of this dissertation, but so too is his work as a whole, which had an enormous impact on the authors of my chosen texts. Once I have explored his influence, I parse the difference between scientific romance and science fiction.

After studying under T.H. Huxley for a year, Wells had “adopted the Darwinian faith with the fervour of a religious convert,” and his early scientific romances worked out “the logical consequences of Darwinian theory in a series of literary thought-experiments.”¹ These thought experiments are marked not only by the palpable excitement of Wells’s soaring imagination, but also by their cosmic pessimism, which frequently expressed the view of his old teacher, Huxley, that: “From the point of view of the moralist the animal world is on about the same level as a gladiator show.”² *The Time Machine* (1895), dramatizes the fears of degeneration current among late Victorians, while *The Island of Dr Moreau* (1896) and *The Invisible Man* (1897) display a deep apprehension about science. Perhaps his best-known work, *The War of the Worlds* (1898), shows “a universe in which good and evil are relative, depending on your ecological position,” a theme which would find further expression in the work of John Wyndham some fifty years later.³

By the Edwardian period, Wells had begun to move away from his earlier pessimism, and his “twentieth-century fiction has as one of its major aims the countering of that vision of

¹ Brian Stableford, *Scientific Romances in Britain 1890-1950* (London: Fourth Estate Limited, 1985) p. 29.

² T.H. Huxley, quoted in Naomi Beck, "Social Darwinism," p. 200.

³ Michael Draper, *H. G Wells*, p. 51

meaningless flux present in the earlier work.”⁴ Wells would concentrate on works expressing a “utopian idealism . . . which looks forward to the destruction of the present world and its replacement by a better.”⁵ He imagined multiple iterations of a technocratic elite in charge of a World State, and remained true to his secular belief that “Civilisation is to be transformed by a small group of enlightened cultural and educational giants.”⁶

Both of these strands of Wells’s thought can be seen in *The Food of the Gods*, with which I started this dissertation. The first half of the novel is mainly concerned with “the misuse of science, coupled with human folly,” as evidenced by the bumbling nature of the scientists, who, through their own absent-mindedness, allow the ‘boom food’ to escape from the laboratory.⁷ Although tampering with forces well beyond their control, these scientists are blind to the dangers. As Batchelor says: “Great inventions are made by little men and mishandled by the incompetence of the pure intellectual.”⁸

These sections also allow Wells to satirize contemporary society, represented in the following quote by the vicar:

‘We are out of it all,’ said the vicar. ‘We live in an atmosphere of simple and permanent things, Birth and Toil, simple seed-time and simple harvest. The Uproar passes us by.’ He was always very great upon what he called the permanent things. ‘Things change,’ he would say, ‘but Humanity – *aere perennius*.’⁹

⁴ Michael Draper, *H. G Wells*, p. 59

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 11

⁶ John Batchelor, *H.G. Wells* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) p. 68.

⁷ Linda Dryden, “Introduction,” *The Food of the Gods* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 2017) p. 21.

⁸ John Batchelor, *H.G Wells*, p. 66.

⁹ H.G Wells, *The Food of the Gods*, p. 257.

This passage is a typical piece of Wellsian irony - while the vicar is saying these words an old woman goes past carrying a stolen tin of food, which will later alter her grandson beyond recognition. As well as poking fun at the complacency of the vicar, Wells satirizes the aristocracy, as seen in the character of Lady Wondershoot, who puts one of the giant children to work in a chalk pit, reasoning that “Satan finds some mischief still for idle hands. At any rate among the labouring classes.”¹⁰ This use of satire is echoed in later works, such as *The Hampdenshire Wonder* and *Odd John*, as is the apprehension about science, which can be seen in most of my British authors.

In the second half of *The Food of the Gods*, the humorous, satirical elements fall away, and instead, the giant children begin to take on an increasingly symbolic value. They are a new order, a new race of men set to inherit the earth from the adults currently in power, who are described in increasingly bitter terms. This can be seen when one of the giant children sneers at the governments wish to eradicate them:

They could go on – safe for ever, living their little pigmy lives, doing pigmy kindnesses and pigmy cruelties each to the other; they might even perhaps attain a sort of pigmy millennium, make an end to war, make an end to over-population, sit down in a worldwide city to practise pigmy arts, worshipping one another till the world begins to freeze.¹¹

This contrasting of the giant children with the “pigmy” adults also echoes in later works, where, as I have said, it is often the adults who are described as being childish. The final image in *The Food of the Gods*, the child using Earth as a footstool and reaching out for the

¹⁰ H.G Wells, *The Food of the Gods*, p. 274.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 346.

stars, was a favourite image of Wells's, which he used in earlier works, including *Anticipations* (1901) and *The Discovery of the Future* (1902).¹² The transcendental, religious overtones of the image are heightened by the allusion to God's statement that "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool" (Isaiah 66.1).

Overall, then, *The Food of the Gods* stands an early fictional expression of the themes I have covered in this chapter. According to Humphries, Wells shared the Edwardian sense "that a child's vision was the key to society's regeneration and survival."¹³ The giant children can be seen as an expression of this belief, representing a powerful, rejuvenating Life Force, and pitting "science and wisdom against the superstitious conservatism of their parents."¹⁴ The religious aspects of the final image are also in keeping with the Edwardian trend for transferring spiritual imagery into worldly things. Furthermore, Wells insistence on the superiority of the children, and the fact that they represent a form of progress, is in keeping with the tenets of social Darwinism discussed above.

For all Wells's identification with the children, their supposed superiority is a problematic area in *The Food of the Gods*. As Draper says, the idea that they "represent an improvement on normal human beings is not supported by any evidence. It is simply the self-interested opinion of the giants and the scientists responsible for their creation."¹⁵ For this reason I am hesitant about calling the giant children in *The Food of the Gods* true representatives of the superchild motif, and argue that they are better thought of as precursors to the later explorations. Later authors would work very hard to convince readers of their character's superiority, while Wells is less rigorous; beyond their enormous size there is no

¹² Linda Dryden, "Introduction," *The Food of the Gods*, p. 24.

¹³ Andrew F. Humphries, "From the Enchanted Garden to the Steps of My Father's House," *The Child in British Literature*, ed. Adrienne E. Gavin (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. 2012) p. 188.

¹⁴ Brian Stableford, *Scientific Romances in Britain 1890-1950*, p. 69.

¹⁵ Michael Draper, *H. G. Wells*, p. 64.

reason to assume they are ‘better’ in the senses I have already mentioned in connection to superhumans, that is, more intelligent, or possessing special powers. Still, the image of a giant child reaching for the stars at the end has a symbolic power which is hard to shake, representing, as it does, the hope that humans may one day transcend their limitations and become close to gods. By coupling the Edwardian conception of a child as a God-like, regenerative ‘other’ with the notion of a ‘superior’ man drawn from social Darwinism, Wells created an image that resonates with the later works featuring the superchild motif. All of the subsequent depictions would draw on this cluster of themes to a greater or lesser extent, mixing the ingredients in different amounts to create the variety of superchildren I am studying in this dissertation. Therefore, *The Food of the Gods* stands as the logical starting point for my discussion of the superchild in British scientific romance.

The influence of Wells on the authors of my chosen texts is another reason for starting my dissertation with his work. J.D. Beresford was especially influenced by him, and consciously took Wells “as his main literary model.”¹⁶ Wells’s novels had a profound impact on Beresford’s world view, as he explained in an essay from 1913:

I remember first how they gave me the delight of living in a changed world, and secondly how they led me to understand that all life, as I knew it, was open to criticism; that it was a phase in evolution, and not, as I had once believed, essential, ordained and static.¹⁷

At a time when Beresford was moving away from the religious views of his clergyman father, Wells helped him to define his own beliefs, and can therefore be seen as

¹⁶ George M. Johnson, *J.D. Beresford* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1998) p. 15.

¹⁷ J. D. Beresford, “Anger and Dismay,” *The Blue Review*, Vol. 1 No.2 (1913) <<http://modjourn.org/index.html>> [accessed 20 November 2018] p. 93.

the foundation stone upon which Beresford built his own fiction. In contrast, Wells's influence on Olaf Stapledon was less pronounced. In a letter to him from 1931, Stapledon admitted that he'd only read two of his scientific romances (*The War of the Worlds* and *The Star*), but acknowledged the influence of the utopian writing Wells was producing at the time, saying "a man does not record his debt to the air he breathes in common with everyone else."¹⁸ For all this graciousness, Stapledon had reservations about much of Wells's thought, and described himself as an "erring disciple" of the older man.¹⁹ Still, it's possible to see the seeds of the grand scope Stapledon would later become famous for in much of Wells's work, and Ashley and Clute also point to Stapledon's adoption of the "tough-love Social Darwinism" found in some of Wells's fiction and nonfiction.²⁰

Arthur C. Clarke was open in his admiration for "the master, H.G. Wells."²¹ In an introduction to *War of the World* from 1962, Clarke's engineer's eye is evident, as he describes all of the inventions Wells imagined in his early scientific romances which had since been created in the real world.²² He concludes the introduction by saying that Wells "saw the universe, with all its infinite promise and peril. He believed—though not blindly—that men were capable of improvement and might one day build sane and peaceful societies on all the worlds that lay within their reach."²³ Wells's scientific rigour, or at least his ability

¹⁸ Olaf Stapledon, quoted in Robert Crossley, "Famous Mythical Beasts: Olaf Stapledon and H.G. Wells, *The Georgia Review*, Vol.36, No.3 (Fall 1982), <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/41398486> [accessed 15 October 2018] p. 622.

¹⁹ Robert Shelton, "The Mars-Begotten Men of Olaf Stapledon and H.G. Wells," *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Mar., 1984) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/4239583>> [accessed: 30 August 2019] p. 11; Olaf Stapledon, quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 11.

²⁰ Mike Ashley and John Clute, "Stapledon, Olaf", *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, eds. John Clute, David Langford, Peter Nicholls and Graham Sleight (London: Gollancz, updated 31 August 2018) <http://www.sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/stapledon_olaf> [accessed 30 August 2019]

²¹ Arthur C. Clarke, *Astounding Days, A Science Fictional Autobiography* (New York : Bantam Books, 1990) p. 22.

²² Arthur C. Clarke, "Introduction," *The Invisible Man and War of the Worlds* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1962) pp. xi- xix.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. xix.

to stretch a veil of plausability over his fantasies, were clearly influential on Clarke's own writing, and Clarke's interest in the human journey to the stars can also be seen as another manifestation of Wells's influence.

To my mind, though, it is Clarke's contemporary, John Wyndham, who can be most closely linked to Wells, especially his scientific romance cycle. For example, when a character in *The Midwich Cuckoos* (1957) feels his "situation at the summit of creation to be threatened," I found myself irresistibly reminded of the narrator in *The War of the Worlds* and his "sense of dethronement, a persuasion that I was no longer a master."²⁴ Suvin has argued that the "fundamental historical lesson" of Wells's early scientific romance cycle is that "the stifling bourgeois society is but a short moment in a menacing but also open-ended human evolution under the stars."²⁵ Wyndham often repeated this lesson in his own work, using threatening superchildren, violent plants, and giant sea monsters as a way of "stripping away the assumption of permanence attached to mass society."²⁶ More than any of the other authors, Wyndham uses imaginative interpretations of evolutionary theory to puncture the complacency of contemporary humanity in the manner of early Wells.

All of the above points to another, final, reason for dwelling on the influence of Wells, which is his central importance to the genre of scientific romances. In *Scientific Romances in Britain 1890-1950*, Stableford proposes that British speculative fiction developed "quite separately from the American tradition of science fiction," and gives the years 1890 to 1950 as the span of time "within which we can speak of 'scientific romance'

²⁴ John Wyndham, *The Midwich Cuckoos*, p. 113; H.G. Wells, *The War of the Worlds* (London: Gollanz, 2017), p. 139.

²⁵ Darko Suvin, "Introduction," *H.G. Wells and Modern Science Fiction*, ed. Suvin, Darko (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1977) p. 29.

²⁶ Miles Link, "'A Very Primitive Matter': John Wyndham on Catastrophe and Survival," *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies* (Summer 2015) <<https://search.proquest.com/docview/2152742483?accountid=8630>> [accessed 15 June 2019] p. 64.

having been a distinctive species of English fiction.”²⁷ In this dissertation I will show how the influence of these scientific romances lingered into the 1950s, and can be seen in all of the novels written by my chosen British authors. Therefore, a definition of what constitutes a “scientific romance” is useful before going any further.

Although Stableford doesn’t give a blanket definition of what is, or is not, a scientific romance, he does point to several commonalities shared by works in this genre. The first, and perhaps most important, thread which runs through British scientific romance is the influence of Wells. Stableford says that from the point of view of consumers and producers, later British writers colonized the niche that Wells had carved out, and all of the writers were aware that “they were to some extent following in his footsteps.”²⁸ I have already shown the truth of this with regards to the British writers in my dissertation, but it is important to contrast this with Wells’s status in America. Although many of Wells’s early works were reprinted in the incipient pulp magazines, his primacy was not as obvious, and “instead of creating a new literary niche he was instead absorbed into one that was indigenously formulated.”²⁹ Likewise, Wells’s later, utopian writings appear to have provoked little comment in the American pulp scene.

Apart from the influence of Wells, another point of difference between British scientific romances and American science fiction is in their choice of themes. The questions, speculations, and philosophies inspired by evolutionary theory are at the heart of many British scientific romances, but “American writers after the turn of the century were much less disposed to adopt premises from evolutionary theory, and early American speculative fiction was mostly content to steer clear of this particular war of ideas.”³⁰ Stableford posits

²⁷ Brian Stableford, *Scientific Romances in Britain 1890-1950*, p. 3.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

that this is in a large part down to the different religious climates of the two countries.³¹ It can also be seen as another manifestation of the different status Wells enjoyed in the respective countries, for as Stableford says, “the fact that evolutionary fantasies came to play such an important role in British scientific romance was largely due to the enormity of his influence.”³² In America, where his influence was not so large, evolutionary fantasies play much less of a role.

The third point of contrast concerns British and American attitudes towards the new technological marvels bequeathed by science. British writers were often ambivalent about the impact of science, and considered the ways in which it might change society to be highly problematic. American writers, on the other hand, did not consider the problem with the same intensity. In fact, many American writers did not feel there was a problem at all, and openly embraced technology. This was especially true in the years following World War One. While the European economies were smashed in the war, the United States saw a tremendous upsurge in financial and industrial power, and this is reflected in their science fiction. As Stableford says:

Modern technology really did seem to be bringing about a social metamorphosis in the USA, while Britain remained enmired in economic chaos, seemingly abandoned by progress. It is hardly surprising that speculative fiction began to boom in America, producing a kind of science fiction which rejoiced in the limitless opportunities of futuristic adventure and looked forward to a plethora of new inventions.³³

³¹ Brian Stableford, *Scientific Romances in Britain 1890-1950*, p. 6.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 29.

³³ *Ibid.*, p150.

To sum up then, British scientific romances share three commonalities which distinguish them from American science fiction, first, there is the influence of H.G Wells, second, there is an interest in evolutionary themes, and third, there is an ambivalence towards technology. It is with these differences in mind that my dissertation finishes with a chapter focussed on the American superchild.

The superchild in the twentieth century

For the individual analysis of my chosen texts, I have studied them in largely chronological order. This is for two reasons. First, by studying each text in order, I will be able to see how my chosen authors are building on the authors before them, if indeed they are. Second, as the authors frequently reflect on the conditions of their age, it made sense for me to follow the historical progression through their works, and to understand how, and why, texts from later eras differ from the earlier texts. However, there are exceptions to this chronological ordering. I will study John Wyndham's work out of chronological order because the later novel, *The Midwich Cuckoos*, provides a better definition for Wyndham's ideas of 'civilized' versus 'primitive' values than the earlier novel. These ideas are of key importance in his work, so it was important to define them up front. The second exception is the chapter concerning the pulps, where the dissertation jumps back in time to the 1940s. This allows me to study the American stories together as a separate tradition, rather than shuffling the pulp texts in amongst the scientific romances that constitute my main focus for this dissertation.

In my first chapter I will look at J.D. Beresford's *The Hampdenshire Wonder* (1911). Although little known, it is a significant work, especially in regards to the motif I am studying. With the possible exception of the giant children in *The Food of the Gods*, Victor Stott can be seen as the first superchild in the scientific romance tradition. According to Stableford, *The Hampdenshire Wonder* is also "the first important story based on serious speculation about the intellectual nature of a human who has reached a 'higher' evolutionary stage."¹ Given that super intelligence would go on to be such an important theme, this alone makes it worthy of attention.

Like *The Food of the Gods*, Beresford's novel is distinctly Edwardian work, using the popular conception of the child as a regenerative 'other,' as well as drawing the ideas of a powerful, creative 'Life Force' that were current at the time. Beresford also uses his superchild as a way of satirizing society, in much the same way as Wells did in *The Food of the Gods*. While Wells contrasted his giant children with the "little" or "pygmy" adults, Beresford uses his intellectual superchild Victor Stott to highlight the childishness of adults, in an ironic reversal of established age roles.

For all their similarities, there is a major difference between the two works. Unlike Wells in *The Food of the Gods*, who uncritically offered up his giant children as new gods, Beresford is never wholly on the side of his superchild. In a 1915 survey of Wells, Beresford himself made the charge that "Mr Wells has identified himself too closely with the giants."² This unwillingness to identify solely with the superchild makes *The Hampdenshire Wonder* a subtler, more layered work than *The Food of the Gods*. While it dramatizes, and indeed, seems to celebrate, the sweeping away of traditional religion by science, it remains

¹ Brian Stableford, *Scientific Romances in Britain 1890-1950*, pp. 103-104.

² J.D Beresford, *H.G Wells* (London: Nisbet & Co, 1915), Web: <<http://www.archive.org/details/hgwellsbOObere>> [accessed 20 December 2018.] p. 54.

ambivalent about purely intellectual development. In the end, *The Hampdenshire Wonder* emerges more as a muted appeal for spirituality and “mystery” than a celebration of progress.

Although *The Hampdenshire Wonder* remains something of an obscurity, it has garnered some notice from critics and writers. Bleiler described it as the “first important novel about a superman, and in many respects still the best,” while Lester Del Rey said it has been “considered one of the great classics of science fiction by those fortunate enough to have read it.”³ Overall then, *The Hampdenshire Wonder* is the natural starting point for discussions about the superchild in science fiction, acting an often overlooked ancestor to the more famous novels that came after it.

In my second chapter I will look at Olaf Stapledon’s *Odd John* (1935), which presents “a colder and harsher reworking” of the intelligent superchild theme seen in *The Hampdenshire Wonder*.⁴ This harshness can perhaps be attributed to the time Stapledon was writing in. Fiedler tells us that “Stapledon was essentially a thirties novelist,” publishing all of his major works between 1930 and 1937.⁵ Subsequently, much of Stapledon’s work is “testimony to the dramatic loss of morale which spread like an epidemic through the British intelligentsia” in the inter-war years.⁶ The loss of morale was precipitated by the First World War, a brutal conflict which left many questioning how civilized their ‘civilization’ really was, as well as whether science would, at the Edwardians had hoped, lead them on the road to progress, or simply to a more efficient destruction. This anxiety was exacerbated in the 1930s by the looming clouds of another war. For many, it increasingly “seemed that there was no escape from the dilemmas posed by the modern age.”⁷ *Odd John* reflects all of these fears,

³ Everett Franklin Bleiler, *Science-fiction, the Early Years* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1990), pp. 57-58; Lester Del Rey, *The World of Science Fiction, 1926-1976* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc. 1980), pp. 20-21.

⁴ Peter Nicholls and David Langford, “Intelligence,” *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*.

⁵ Leslie A. Fiedler, *Olaf Stapledon, A Man Divided*, p. 31.

⁶ Brian Stableford, *Scientific Romances in Britain 1890-1950*, p. 272.

⁷ Richard Overy, *The Morbid Age*, (London: Penguin, 2009), p. 5.

with its hyper-intelligent superchild passing judgement on a world caught in the grip of fascism and hate, and haunted by “the growing sense that there’s something wrong with modern solely-scientific culture.”⁸

Although *Odd John* is one of Stapledon’s most widely-read books, its small scale makes it something of an outlier in his overall oeuvre. Generally speaking, Stapledon’s work is marked by a vast, cosmic scope, with novels like *Last and First Men* (1930) imagining the future of humanity over the course of the next two billion years. Of course, the grand scale of the evolutionary trajectory is still implicit in the superchild motif, but *Odd John* uses a much smaller canvas to depict it on that Stapledon’s other work. Despite the difference in scale, *Odd John* still shares with Stapledon’s other novels the author’s interest in philosophy, a subject he had gained a doctorate in five years before publishing his first novel. The influence of this philosophy constitutes a large part of my analysis of *Odd John*.

I have chosen *Odd John* as I believe it is the superchild work that best reflects the anxiety of the interwar years in Britain. As I have already noted, the superman subgenre has a long pedigree, but Fiedler has noted that it wasn’t until the 1930s that it became a major subgenre of science fiction, “perhaps because the notion of transcending human limitations had a special appeal in a time when men were confronting problems they feared insolvable though of their own making.”⁹ *Odd John* can be seen as part of a larger trend, one which involved supermen commenting much more harshly on the current world situation than they had in the past. Gone is the relatively gentle satire of Wells and Beresford, and in its place arrives a sense of disgust and impatience. According to Stableford, the 1930s stand as the “one period to have produced wildly enthusiastic accounts of that hypothetical era to come when we and our kind would be swept into the dustbin of history where we belong, so that

⁸ Olaf Stapledon, *Odd John*, p. 79

⁹ Leslie A. Fiedler, *Olaf Stapledon, A Man Divided*, p. 99.

others more deserving of existence might take our place.”¹⁰ This enthusiasm for the destruction of *Homo sapiens* is evident throughout *Odd John*.

My third chapter concerns Arthur C. Clarke, who was profoundly influenced by Olaf Stapledon, particularly the grand, cosmic scale which typifies much of his work. In his science fiction autobiography, *Astounding Days*, Clarke tells of his first encounter with Stapledon’s *Last and First Men* (1930):

no book before or since has had such an impact on my imagination; the Stapledonian vistas of millions and *hundreds* of millions of years, the rise and fall of civilizations and entire races of Man, changed my whole outlook on the Universe and has influenced much of my writing since.¹¹

This cosmic scope didn’t originate with Stapledon, it can be observed in the ending of Wells’s *The Time Traveller*, for example, but in works like *Last and First Men* and *Star Maker* (1937), he arguably took it further than any writer before or since, working on a canvas of dazzling breadth.

Clarke would use the same grand scope in many of his own works, including *Childhood’s End* (1953), which is my focus in this chapter. Clarke’s novel shares many themes with *The Hampdenshire Wonder* and *Odd John*, not least the central idea of *Homo sapiens* being replaced by a superior species, but it uses the cosmic scope inherited from Stapledon to depict superchildren who progress far beyond their literary predecessors. Using images of transcendence that owe more to the spiritual tradition than anything else, Clarke imagines the transformation and eventual leavetaking off an entire generation of children

¹⁰ Brian Stableford, *Scientific Romances in Britain 1890-1950*, p. 268.

¹¹ Arthur C. Clarke, *Astounding Days, A Science Fictional Autobiography*, pp. 23-24.

worldwide. Of all the superchild texts in this dissertation, *Childhood's End* is the fullest expression of Wells's transcendent symbol of the child using Earth as a footstool and reaching for the stars.

If we imagine a straight line running from the early scientific romances of Wells, through Beresford, Stapledon and Clarke, then my next chosen author, John Wyndham, represents both a break in this line and a circling back to the start. Damon Knight said Wyndham was "something remarkably like a new H.G. Wells – not the wise-old-owl Wells, more interested in sermon than story, but the young Wells, with that astonishing, compelling gift of pure storytelling."¹² The Wells that Wyndham drew influence from wasn't the utopian who imagined a child reaching for the stars, but the one who wrote *War of the Worlds*, which shows "a universe in which good and evil are relative, depending on your ecological position."¹³ Instead of the spiritual, transcendental visions of his contemporary Clarke, Wyndham offers us glimpses of an amoral, violent, and competitive Nature, where his characters must choose between their 'civilized' notions or their 'primitive' instincts.

My fourth chapter will look at *The Midwich Cuckoos*, in which an archetypal sleepy English village is face with an evolutionary threat in the form of angelic blonde children. The fifth will focus on *The Chrysalids*, which concerns the struggle for survival of a group of telepathic children in a hostile, post-apocalyptic world. Both of these novels draw heavily on the viewpoint Wyndham derived from Wells, who himself derived it from Huxley, which sees nature as "red in tooth and claw." The discussion of these themes will make up the bulk of my analysis. The novels also draw on the anxieties of the 1950s, including Cold War paranoia and the rise of the teenager, and I will address these themes briefly as well.

¹² Damon Knight, *In Search of Wonder* (Illinois: Advent, 1967), p. 252.

¹³ Michael Draper, *H. G. Wells*, p. 51

Wyndham's previous history as a writer for American pulp magazines is also relevant to my discussion. Arthur C. Clarke also wrote for the pulps, but out of the two, Wyndham arguably represents the best example of the synthesis that occurred in the 1950s between the American tradition of science fiction and British scientific romances. As Ketterer says:

[Wyndham] was able to combine the motifs and plotting techniques he learned from his American apprenticeship with the Wellsian model and so claim the originality of providing essential bridges not only between American and British sf but also between British 'scientific romance' and the many varieties of 'science fiction' that followed.¹⁴

For these reasons, as well as for the fact that he wrote two superchild works in close succession, Wyndham was a natural choice to round off my exploration of the superchild in British scientific romance.

To conclude my dissertation, I have chosen to study several American works from the pulp era. They provide points of comparison with British scientific romances, and allow me to test the truth of Stableford's assertion that the two traditions can be considered as separate genres. From the early 1940s to the mid-1950s, there was an overflowing of superchild stories from American writers in what is called the "superman boom," and it would have been churlish to ignore such a wide field of examples concerning the motif I am studying. Through analysis of these texts, I hope to give a general overview of the American conception of the superchild by introducing and examining a few illuminating examples.

¹⁴ David Ketterer and J.W.B.Harris, "Vivisection: Schoolboy 'John Wyndham's' First Publication?" *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol.26. No.2 (July 1999) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/4240789>> [accessed: 15 August 2019] p. 305

First, I will consider the influence of, John W Campbell, the editor of *Astounding* magazine from 1938, who I argue is largely responsible for the superman boom. Next I will analysis A.E van Vogt's *Slan* (1940), one of the earliest superchild texts in pulp science fiction, and an excellent example of Campbell's influence in play. I have then chosen two texts by the husband and wife team of Henry Kuttner and C.L Moore, who wrote together under the pseudonym Lewis Padgett. The first of these, *Mutant* (1953), offers a good point of comparison with *Slan*, and other Campbellian texts, and the second, *Mimsy Were the Borogroves* (1943) offers a highly original take on many of the themes running throughout this dissertation. Theodore Sturgeon's *More Than Human* (1953) is the least Campbellian of my chosen pulp texts, and is instead much closer to the British scientific romance tradition. It therefore stands as something of a one off, allowing an interesting point of comparison with British scientific romances and Campbellian pulp fiction. My final chosen text from the pulps is Jerome Bixby's "It's a *Good* Life" (1953), which features the archetypal "unsettling child" as its protagonist.

To conclude the dissertation, I will first summarise what I have learned about the superchild character, and its different uses by different authors throughout the years. I will then give a brief overview of the superchild's development in the second half of the twentieth-century and up to the present day.

Chapter 1.

The Hampdenshire Wonder

Like *The Food of the Gods*, J.D Beresford's *The Hampdenshire Wonder* is a distinctly Edwardian work, and it conforms to many of the prevalent modes in Edwardian literature, particularly in its depiction of the landscape and presentation of the child as a regenerative 'other.' The setting of the novel is the first example. As Howkins explains, a sentimentalized version of the English countryside, especially the southern countryside, began to emerge in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, partly in reaction to the ills of industrialized, urban life.¹ Writers like Kenneth Grahame presented visions of sun blessed Arcadias, encapsulating a certain view of pre-industrial England, and of Englishness itself. This construction was later called Deep England, a "blissful vista of charming, timeless villages, each grouped around its ancient church, its peaceful green, its vernacular manor house."² Beresford's locations in *The Hampdenshire Wonder* are all fictional, but they are clearly in the same vein. The cricket grounds, village common, manor house, and cottages nestled in hills are all present, as are the squire, peasants, and the priest.

Also, as I noted in the introduction, children in Edwardian literature are often presented as 'others,' who occupy different worlds and possess superior wisdom and power. They are "unreachable, self-contained . . . characters whose worlds run on their own grooves and who engage with adults only in ways and on terms that suit them."³ Victor Stott, the

¹ Alun Howkins, "The discovery of rural England," *Englishness: Politics and Culture 1880–1920*, ed. Robert Colls and Philip Dodd (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 1987), p. 34.

² Trevor Wild, *Village England: A Social History of the Countryside* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2004), p. 16.

³ Adrienne E. Gavin and Andrew F. Humphries, "Worlds Enough and Time: The Cult of Childhood in Edwardian Fiction," p. 13.

superchild in *The Hampdenshire Wonder*, seems cast from the same mold as other Edwardian children. His enormous intellect makes him an unmistakable ‘other,’ a “very god among men” in the words of the narrator.⁴ He is often shown to be lost in abstraction, his mind inhabiting a world far beyond the reach of any adult. He speaks only rarely, and shows little interest in adults when they try to talk to him. The adults, for their part, are appalled by Victor’s detached manner, which makes no concessions whatsoever to their views of politeness. Thus, Victor stands as a perfect example of the Edwardian conception of the child as a superior, unreachable, self-contained ‘other,’ who engages with adults only on his terms.

Beresford also hints at Victor’s potential to act as a saviour. This is another common feature of Edwardian children, whose “regenerative capacities were emphasised in fictional constructs, providing a counterbalance to the late-Victorian decadent sense of the deterioration of civilization.”⁵ Challis, an amateur anthropologist and local magnate, voices this hope in Victor’s regenerative capacity, while chastising himself and society for their obsession with degeneration:

We are looking downwards, downwards always; digging in old muck heaps; raking up all kinds of unsavoury rubbish to prove that we were born out of the dirt. And we have never a thought for the future in all our work – a future that might be glorious, who knows? Here, perhaps in this village, insignificant from most points of view, but set in a country that should teach us to raise our eyes from the ground; here, in this tiny hamlet, is living

⁴ J. D. Beresford, *The Hampdenshire Wonder*, p. 204.

⁵ George M. Johnson, “Evil is in the Eye of the Beholder: Threatening Children in Two Edwardian Speculative Satires,” *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (2014) <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5621/sciefictstud.41.1.0026>> [accessed 19 March 2018], p. 29.

a child who may become greater than Socrates or Shakespeare, a child who may revolutionise our conceptions of time and space.⁶

The ending of *The Hampdenshire Wonder* presents a final similarity with other Edwardian texts, though in a much darker form. Gavin and Humphries note that Edwardian authors rarely showed their children growing up, and sought “to ‘fix’ the child in permanent childhood.”⁷ By fixing them in childhood, these authors saved their child characters from suffering the Romantic idea of a ‘fall from grace’ brought about by maturity. Victor Stott avoids this ‘fall from grace,’ but it’s at the cost of his life. In the end he is fixed in permanent childhood by being pressed face first into the soft mud of the village pond.

As well as drawing on themes found in Edwardian literature, Beresford drew inspiration from scientific ideas current at the time. Victor is the product of a creative “skip” in evolution, though the evolutionary process depicted in *The Hampdenshire Wonder* owes little to Darwin, and more to the work of the French philosopher Henri Bergson. For Bergson, evolutionary change was not caused by Darwinian mechanisms like natural selection, but by the *élan vital*, a life force infused in all matter which is capable of creative leaps in unpredictable directions. Beresford’s debt to Bergson is explicitly acknowledged within the text. His name is mentioned on the very first page of the novel (twenty-six words into the story to be precise), with the narrator saying he was reading *Time and Free Will* on the train when he first met the infant Victor. Later, when Victor is going through the narrator’s books, he casually dismisses Kant, Hegel and Nietzsche and the like, but pauses to show interest in Bergson’s *Creative Evolution*.

⁶ J. D. Beresford, *The Hampdenshire Wonder*, p.113.

⁷ Adrienne E. Gavin and Andrew F. Humphries, “Worlds Enough and Time: The Cult of Childhood in Edwardian Fiction,” p. 11.

Rose tells us that the idea of a creative life force was already widespread among Edwardian intellectuals before Bergson, having been popularized by the posthumous publication of Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh* (1903).⁸ There was no hard scientific evidence for the existence of such a Life Force, yet it became an article of faith among some Edwardian intellectuals. For Rose, the "fact that vitalism made such headway in the face of all experimental evidence underscores the recurrent weakness in Edwardian thought – wishful thinking."⁹ As I have already covered in the introduction, many Edwardians were prone to believe that "the conflict between religion and science could be worked out in a tidy synthesis," and the Life Force was one such synthesis, "a secular theology consistent with evolutionary science."¹⁰ In reality, however, it can be seen as another secular faith, a surrogate religion for those who'd abandoned Christianity.

Despite these shaky scientific foundations, or perhaps because of them, Beresford expends much effort in the early portions of the novel to make his superchild's origin convincing. The majority of Part 1 is given over to the history of Victor's father, a once-famous cricketer called Ginger Stott, whose bowling was so powerful that a journalist watching him exclaims, "This man will have to be barred; it means the end of cricket."¹¹ When an accident ends his career, Ginger resolves to teach others his technique, but finds it impossible because of the other players' acquired habits. Ginger therefore decides to marry and have a son. His determination that his son will be born without habits, a determination enthusiastically supported by his wife, is put forward by Beresford as the reason for the creative leap in evolution that produced Victor. By a sheer act of will, he suggests, Victor's parents were able to harness the *élan vital* while their child was gestating.

⁸ Jonathan Rose, *The Edwardian Temperament 1895-1919*, p. 80.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p80.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p80.

¹¹ J. D. Beresford, *The Hampdenshire Wonder*, p37.

Victor, however, is far from the physical wonder Ginger was hoping for, and is instead a “blarsted freak.”¹² Victor’s unusual appearance and strange manner is enough to drive Ginger Stott away from the family home. As I mentioned in the introduction, Jung stated that the child in myth often faces “abandonment and danger through persecution.”¹³ Ginger Stott fulfils the first part, ‘abandonment,’ while the second, “persecution,” is fulfilled by the village priest, Percy Crashaw, who takes against Victor from the first moment he sees him.

Beresford tells us that Crashaw had once been a “disciple of the school that attempts the reconciliation of Religion and Science,” but has since turned his back on reconciliation, becoming “as ardent an opponent of science as he had once been a defender.”¹⁴ Moreover, since his rejection of science he has “lapsed into certain forms of medievalism.”¹⁵ After first meeting the infant Victor, Crashaw believes him to be possessed by evil spirits, and preaches as much in his Sunday sermons. When Victor denies the existence of God at four years old, Crashaw demands that he be “put under restraint, his tongue bridled, and any opportunity to proclaim his blasphemous doctrines forcibly denied to him.”¹⁶ Later, Crashaw insists that Victor must go to school, to teach him “the necessity of submitting himself to all his governors, teachers, spiritual pastors, and masters.”¹⁷ Victor is submitted to the local Educational Committee for an assessment, but they fail to come to any firm conclusion, leaving Crashaw frustrated and bitter.

The passages that follow Victor’s assessment contain the clearest indications of what the superchild and Crashaw symbolise within the text, that is, science and progress on the one

¹² J. D. Beresford, *The Hampdenshire Wonder*, p. 54.

¹³ C.G Jung, “The Psychology of the Child Archetype,” p. 85.

¹⁴ J. D. Beresford, *The Hampdenshire Wonder*, p. 81.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

hand, and Christianity and conservatism on the other. Victor is equated with “an elusive spirit of swiftness which has no name, but may be figured as the genius of modernity.”¹⁸

Beresford says it was for Crashaw to realise that:

he was no longer the dominant force of progress; that he had been outstripped, left toiling and shouting vain words on a road that had served its purpose, and though it still remained and was used as a means of travel, was becoming year by year more antiquated and despised.¹⁹

Beresford is emphatic that Crashaw “could never impede any more that elusive spirit of swiftness; it had run past him.”²⁰ Crashaw is absent for the closing third of the novel, save for one sighting of him in the distance, where the narrator says he “gave me the impression of being a dangerous man, a thwarted fanatic, brooding over his defeat.”²¹ When Victor is found pressed in the mud of the pond, the narrator says he “remembers what terrific acts of misapplied courage and ferocious brutality the fanatics of history have been capable of performing when their creed and their authority have been set at naught.”²² Although he doesn’t mention Crashaw by name, the repetition of the word “fanatic,” and the reference to affronted authority helps to implicate him in Victor’s death.

So far then, we have an image of Victor as a “spirit of swiftness,” overtaking the forces of conservatism represented by Crashaw, who’s depicted as cruel, vain, and far more childish than Victor. As I mentioned in the introduction, this reversal of established age roles, whereby the adults are shown to be the childish ones, is a key feature in superchild texts. The

¹⁸ J. D. Beresford, *The Hampdenshire Wonder*, p. 186.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 187.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 187.

²¹ Ibid., p. 230.

²² Ibid., p. 248.

inversion is repeated throughout the book. At one point, Challis tells Victor, “We are children compared to you . . . swayed even in the makings of our laws by little primitive emotions and passions, self-interests, desires.”²³ This is in line with so many Edwardian texts, where, as I have already noted, there is “a clear sense that it is not Father, but children, who know best.”²⁴ For all this, though, *The Hampdenshire Wonder* never fully endorses Victor, and still maintains sympathy with the adults around him. To find out why, we must look at the qualities that Victor lacks.

The two closely related ideas of imagination and play are at the heart of the Edwardian conception of the child, but both are conspicuously absent in Victor Stott. He may be superior to the adults, but unlike other Edwardian children, his superiority is not based on heightened imaginative capabilities but on his phenomenal grasp of cold, hard logic. Challis describes the Victor’s mind as “a magnificent, terrible machine,” which has “not one spark of the imagination of a poet.”²⁵ This complete lack of imagination makes Victor an uncanny figure, a child in outward form, but displaying none of the childlike qualities we’d expect. Just as the adults in Holt’s study were unsettled by precocious children, so the adults in *The Hampdenshire Wonder* “feel a kind of horror” when faced with Victor’s intellect.²⁶ While a reader may dismiss the feelings of Crashaw, and some of the other more superstitious and ignorant adults, Challis and the narrator are shown to be intelligent and thoughtful. Challis especially is kind to Victor, offering him the use of his library and trying to shield him from the Educational Authority. Overall, he and the narrator are sympathetic characters, and the reader is encouraged to trust these characters when they describe the horror of Victor’s intellect.

²³ J. D. Beresford, *The Hampdenshire Wonder*, p. 175.

²⁴ Adrienne E. Gavin and Andrew F. Humphries, “Worlds Enough and Time: The Cult of Childhood in Edwardian Fiction,” p. 11.

²⁵ J. D. Beresford, *The Hampdenshire Wonder*, p. 170.

²⁶ John Holt, *Escape From Childhood*, p. 93.

Compounding Victor's lack of imagination is his lack of play. A set of steps in the Challis's library, for example, which "might have made such a glorious plaything for any other child," is used by Victor only to collect books.²⁷ The character of the village idiot offers an interesting contrast to Victor in this respect, representing the innocence and playfulness that he lacks. The idiot is the only character in the novel that feels no fear of Victor, but Victor has the narrator shoo him away. Victor's rejection of the idiot highlights how far removed from normal human life he is, as the "elements of companionship and the concept of play, as basic as they are to humanity, even to an idiot, are both alien to Victor."²⁸ Challis says that men are "geese and hens to him, creatures to be scared out of the vicinity."²⁹

In fact, it's not the child, but the adults in *The Hampdenshire Wonder* who are shown at play. Challis is an amateur anthropologist, who "with all his apparent devotion to science, was never more than a dilettante."³⁰ Likewise, the narrator is an erstwhile journalist playing at being a philosopher. When Victor, in one of his rare moments of loquaciousness, explains his theory of life, Challis shuts his mind to it. The logical implications of Victor's thoughts scare Challis because he sees they will rob all of his joy at playing with science and knowledge. Here again we have the reversal of established age roles, but this time the satirical edge is blunted. Beresford doesn't mock Challis for his childishness, but in fact gives over the last four pages of the novel to him for a lengthy monologue.

What scared Challis most was the "finality" of Victor's thoughts, for "perfect knowledge implies the peace of death."³¹ For him, "mystery," and the "wonder of the

²⁷ J. D. Beresford, *The Hampdenshire Wonder*, p. 189.

²⁸ George T. Dodds, "Review of *The Wonder* by J.D. Beresford," *SF Site* (2000) <<https://www.sfsite.com/04a/won78.htm>> [accessed 13 December 2018].

²⁹ J. D. Beresford, *The Hampdenshire Wonder*, p. 171.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

imagination” are more important, as they keep us from the despair that comes from understanding everything.³² In the final line, Challis tells the narrator they are:

children in the infancy of the world. Let us to our play in the nursery of our own times. The day will come perhaps, when humanity shall have grown and will have to take upon itself the heavy burden of knowledge . . .
Meanwhile leave us our childish fancies, our little imaginings, our hope – children that we are – of those impossible mysteries beyond the hills.³³

Thus, the novel ends with a refutation of purely scientific knowledge. The weight given to Challis’s speech suggests that the views expressed were Beresford’s own, and this is backed up by Stableford, who notes that “Beresford certainly seems to have found colour and purpose in his own intellectual life through his engagement with mystery and speculations. He was to be constantly attracted by pseudo-scientific fashions - spiritualism, psychoanalysis, ESP, and faith healing among them.”³⁴ In many ways, then, Beresford was typical of a certain type of Edwardian intellectual, that is, someone who had rejected their parents’ faith, and founded other secular ones. Rose also tells us about “the gospel of fun” that pervaded the Edwardian era.³⁵ The spirit of play embodied by Challis is typical of this attitude, expressing a wish to leave the problems of the adult world behind and return to the simpler joys of childhood.

Turning now to Beresford’s presentation of the superchild, I will show how *The Hampdenshire Wonder* conforms to many of the patterns I mentioned in the introduction, and

³² J. D. Beresford, *The Hampdenshire Wonder*, p. 253.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 255.

³⁴ Brian Stableford, *Scientific Romances in Britain 1890-1950*, p. 105.

³⁵ Jonathan Rose, *The Edwardian Temperament 1895-1919*, p. 163.

acts as an excellent early example of how writers can use certain narrative “tricks” to convince the reader of their characters’ superiority. For example, Nicholls and Langford have pointed out that in “many stories of abnormally intelligent supermen or mutants we have to take the intelligence on trust.”³⁶ This is certainly true in *The Hampdenshire Wonder*. Victor Stott’s mind is said to be “too many thousands of years ahead of us,” and as such his thoughts are incomprehensible to other people, which, perforce, must also include the writer.³⁷ This is perhaps why Beresford gives Victor very little dialogue. In scenes where Victor talks at length, such as when he’s explaining his theory of life in the library, none of his words are reported back to us, only other character’s reactions to them. In the rare instances that Victor’s dialogue is recorded, they have a jerky quality that prefigures the pronouncements of robots and computers in later science fiction: “‘Illogical,’ replied the Wonder, ‘not philosophy; a system of trial and error – to evaluate complex variable functions.’”³⁸ Consequently, we only know that Victor’s thoughts are far advanced because the narrator tells us so. This distancing effect heightens the unknowability I mentioned earlier.

In order to make Victor’s reported superiority even more believable, Beresford uses descriptions of his appearance to further emphasise his uniqueness. Victor is described as having an outsized and completely bald head attached to a body that seems slight and frail by comparison. This description ties in perfectly with “the standard image of *homo superior*” I mentioned in the introduction, which Westfahl suggests represents the acknowledgment of neoteny in the future of human evolution. Beresford also makes much use of Victor’s eyes as a way to externalise his difference. In the opening scene, when the narrator meets the infant Victor for the first time, he notes “the impression one received of calm intelligence” in

³⁶ Peter Nicholls and David Langford. “Intelligence”. *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*.

³⁷ J.D. Beresford, *The Hampdenshire Wonder*, p. 232.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 210.

Victor's gaze.³⁹ Later in the book, Challis first realises Victor's intelligence because of his gaze:

...the effect was strangely disconcerting, blinding. One received an impression of extraordinary concentration: it was though for an instant the boy was able to give one a glimpse of the wonderful force of his intellect. When he looked one in the face with intention, it suddenly allowed one to realise, as it were, all the dominating power of his brain, one shrank into insignificance, one felt as an ignorant, intelligent man may feel when confronted with some elaborate theorem of the higher mathematics.⁴⁰

Just as the bald head and atrophied body would go on to become “the standard image of *homo superior*” in science fiction, this use of a child's gaze to demonstrate their alienness and superiority is also echoed in many of the subsequent works in this study, such as the golden eyes of the children in *The Midwich Cuckoos*, and the purple eyes of the child-god Anthony in Jerome Bixby's *It's a Good Life*. This is perhaps a matter of narrative expedience. In most cases, it is the superchildren's minds that are superior, so until they are grown up enough to start talking and acting, the only way the writers can hint at their infant's superiority is by describing the strangeness of their appearance.

The strangeness of Victor's appearance repels people from the start, and even the doctor who delivers him is disgusted by his appearance. This, combined with his heightened intelligence, makes Victor a very lonely character. The same is true for most of the superchildren in my chosen texts, at least in the beginning, though Victor Stott is the most

³⁹ J. D. Beresford, *The Hampdenshire Wonder*, p. 12.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

poignantly alone. Odd John, for example, eventually founds a colony of ‘supernormals,’ while the children in *More Than Human* and *Childhood’s End* combine their powers to create a new being (a *homo gestalt* and Overmind respectively). Likewise, the Slan in van Vogt’s story and the telepathic children in *The Chrysalids* are part of a secret group operating under the ‘normal’ people’s noses, while the children in *The Midwich Cuckoos* are essentially two parts of the same organism. Only Victor has to face the hostile world alone. He is the Jungian archetype writ large, a child shunned, abandoned, and beset by aggression from the moment of his birth, a child who is “*all alone in the world.*”⁴¹

This is shown most clearly in what is perhaps the novel’s best scene, when, having gorged himself on the sum of the world’s knowledge in Challis’s library, Victor asks if there are any others of his kind. ““There is none of your kind,” replied Challis; and the little figure born into the world that could not understand him, that was not ready to receive him, walked to the window and climbed out into the darkness.”⁴² The darkness here can be interpreted as a melancholy representation of ignorance, with the well-lit library being a beacon of knowledge.

Overall, while Victor shares many of the traits I have defined for the superchild motif, he is far from the Wellsian image of a child reaching for the stars. Instead, the scene in the library quoted above, puts me in mind of another image from Wells, which uses the same symbols of light and dark:

Science is a match that man has just got alight. He thought he was in a room
– in moments of devotion a temple – that his light would be reflected from
and display walls inscribed with wonderful secretes and pillars carved with

⁴¹ C.G Jung, “The Psychology of the Child Archetype,” p. 88.

⁴² J. D. Beresford, *The Hampdenshire Wonder*, p. 153.

philosophical systems wrought into harmony. It is a curious sensation, now that the preliminary splutter is over, and the flame burns up clear, to see his hand lit and just a glimpse of himself and the patch he stands on visible, and around him, in place of all that human comfort and beauty he anticipated – darkness still.⁴³

If, as Wells says, science is a match, then Victor Stott is a searchlight on full beam, illuminating the furthest reaches of existence. Adults like Challis are not ready to see, let alone comprehend, what Victor shows them, and this is why no one but Victor's mother mourns his death. His light was simply too strong to live with. *The Hampdenshire Wonder*, therefore, ultimately acts as a reassertion of mystery, an expression of the desire to remain in the darkness a little bit longer, imagining what we will.

⁴³ H.G.Wells quoted in Michael Draper, *H. G Wells*, p. 38.

Chapter 2.

Odd John

For Stapledon, the study of philosophy was a way of finding a faith. Unlike Beresford, who was brought up in a strictly Christian household before turning against the religious view of his father, Stapledon was brought up as an agnostic but rebelled against his father's lack of faith. Christianity held no allure for him, for as his superchild says "too much water has passed under the bridge since the churches were alive, so that's no real use."¹ Likewise, the secular faiths that the Edwardians had founded held little interest for him. Instead, he was determined to work out his beliefs for himself. He did this through philosophy, and Stableford tells us that "most of his fiction can be seen as part of this exploratory quest" as well.²

Central to Stapledon's philosophy, fiction, and burgeoning faith, was the idea of "an exceptional mode of consciousness, giving glimpses of a special insight into the nature of things."³ He first wrote about it this "exceptional mode of consciousness" in a non-fiction work, *A Modern Theory of Ethics* (1929), in which he describes "three moods which the mind may experience with regard to good and evil."⁴ The first mood is "moral zeal," which is felt as a "white-hot indignation against all that is conceived as bad."⁵ The second mood is "disillusion," where the world seems "a tedious and chaotic accident, a foul tangle of thorns and marshes wherein one has somehow to find a tolerable resting place."⁶ The third mood,

¹ Olaf Stapledon, *Odd John*, p. 80.

² Brian Stableford, *Scientific Romances in Britain 1890-1950*, p. 199.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

⁴ Olaf Stapledon, *A Modern Theory of Ethics*, (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1929) pp. 246 and 241.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 242

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 243

and the one Stapledon held in the highest possible regard, was “ecstasy.” This mood is the “discovery of a hitherto unappreciated excellence of the familiar world . . . a kind of unusual wide-awakeness.”⁷ In this mood we “glimpse the same reality from a fresh angle . . . salute a higher kind of excellence which embraces impartially both victory and defeat.”⁸ This idea of ecstasy is central to *Odd John*, and indeed, all of Stapledon’s fiction, which repeats “at greater or less length but often in the same words, the thesis of the last chapters of *A Modern Theory of Ethics*.”⁹

Stapledon came to believe that the future of humanity would lie in a progressive spiritual development towards the point where our ancestors would be able to keep hold of the deep insights gained in moments of ecstasy. *Odd John*, then, is an attempt to dramatize this spiritual development in the life of its superchild hero. In a bold piece of intertextuality, Stapledon refers to “J.D. Beresford’s account of the unhappy Victor Stott” in the opening pages of *Odd John*, and places Victor among those superchildren whose development was “pathetically one sided.”¹⁰ For Stapledon, super intelligence alone was not enough: his superchild’s philosophical and, above all, *spiritual* development is the true core of the novel.

I have already noted Odd John’s neotenous appearance, but his early development also suggests that neoteny is a factor in his superiority. He gestates for eleven months, and is born with “the grotesque appearance of a seven-month foetus.”¹¹ It’s not until he’s fully a year old that he resembles a “normal new-born infant,” and by age four has only progressed to looking like “bright six-month infant.”¹² The suggestion that his delayed development is a factor in his increased intellect is put forward by his mother, Pax, who theorises that normal

⁷ Olaf Stapledon, *A Modern Theory of Ethics*, pp. 246 -247.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 246-247.

⁹ Leslie A. Fiedler, *Olaf Stapledon, A Man Divided*, p. 48.

¹⁰ Olaf Stapledon, *Odd John*, p. 2.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 5.

¹² Ibid., p. 5-6.

babies grow up too fast, saying: ““They don’t give their minds a chance to knit themselves properly.””¹³

Although he’s slow to start, once John’s brain is knit together, his mental development progresses quickly. Unlike Beresford, Stapledon doesn’t dwell on the development of John’s intellect, and instead has him master mathematics, science, and languages within the first twelve pages. In a scene that echoes Victor Stott’s examinations in the library, John is submitted by his enthusiastic father to an interview with a famous mathematician, who is “at first patronising, then enthusiastic, then bewildered; then, with obvious relief, patronizing again; then badly flustered.”¹⁴ By his fourth year, John has had enough, and dismisses the sum of human knowledge as stupid and unimportant. Instead, he focuses on developing his body, something that Victor Stott failed to do. Although born a “pulpy bit of flesh,”¹⁵ through a regimen of his own devising, John becomes incredibly strong and agile, and masters several martial arts.

Next comes John’s social development. Here John adopts a “cuckoo phase,” the disguise Miller says allows superchildren to avoid persecution, which is also something else that Victor Stott failed to do. The latter’s inability to rub along with other people was a major cause of a lot of his problems, but John learns his lesson at aged four, when he’s beaten by his neighbour for his arrogance. His cuckoo phase begins straight after, and he assumes “with perfect accuracy that veneer of modesty and generosity which is so characteristic of the English.”¹⁶ Thus disguised, and able to mingle with humans, John turns amateur anthropologist, and contrives ways to interview people from all walks of life. Stapledon uses his superchild in these sections in much the same way as Beresford used Victor Stott, to

¹³ Olaf Stapledon, *Odd John*, p. 5.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

satirize ordinary human society, including politicians, clergymen, and a priggish millionaire called Mr Magnate. However, “the novel isn’t fundamentally interested in superhumanity as a lens through which to atomise our world.”¹⁷ It’s the spiritual side of superhumanity that Stapledon is interested in, and the first section of the novel is brought to a close when John obtains a measure of enlightenment.

When one considers that Stapledon was an avowed pacifist for his whole life, it’s strange that John’s spiritual development is so intimately bound to killing. His first victim is a kindly policeman, who catches him in an act of cat burglary. As he’s hanging from the drainpipe, John has an epiphany, realising his life was “different from anything which the normal species could conceive . . . It was my task, unique being that I was, to ‘advance the spirit’ on this planet.”¹⁸ The phrase ‘advance the spirit’ is vague, but it is reminiscent of the “spirit” Wells talked of in *The Food of the Gods*, that is, a powerful, rejuvenating life force. Like the giant children, John is an agent for this ‘spirit.’ In order for him to do have the freedom to act out this role, he must kill the policeman, which he does with cold efficiency.

This killing “climaxes a series of challenges to older males in positions of authority,”¹⁹ from his baiting of Mr Magnate and the mathematicians, to his treatment of his father, whom he listens to with “a fleeting contortion of ridicule, even disgust.”²⁰ By killing a symbol of paternal authority, John is committing an Oedipal act, and the configuration is completed shortly after when John sleeps with his mother. At this point, he has already had a homosexual affair with his neighbour and successfully seduced a young heiress, though he was unable to consummate the relationship with her as he felt disgusted by such close contact with someone he considered inferior, likening the heiress to a dog “smelling round me.”²¹ In

¹⁷ Adam Roberts, “Introduction,” *Odd John* (London: Gollanz, 2012) p. v.

¹⁸ Olaf Stapledon, *Odd John*, pp. 37-38.

¹⁹ Leslie A. Fiedler, *Olaf Stapledon, A Man Divided*, p. 109.

²⁰ Olaf Stapledon, *Odd John*, p. 21.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

distress, he turns to his mother, fulfilling two needs. First “he needed soothing”, and second, “he needed to assert his independence of *Homo sapiens*, to free himself of all deep unconscious acquiescence in the conventions of the species that had nurtured him. He needed, therefore, to break what was one of the most cherished of all the taboos of that species.”²² Like the supermen who transcend our moral codes, John’s killing of the policeman, and his subsequent bedding of his mother, separate him from the rest of humanity and start him on the spiritual path towards the apprehension of ecstasy, the core of Stapledon’s philosophy.

John’s separation from normal human society is made literal in the central section of the novel, when, like a hundred would-be messiahs before him, he absconds alone into the wilderness, seeking to escape the spiritual contamination of human civilization. He learns how to hunt and becomes obsessed with killing a stag, an act that “became a symbol . . . as though the angels of God ordered me to do this little mighty deed in preparation for mightier deeds to come.”²³ As before, it’s killing that leads John to enlightenment, and the slaughter of the stag teaches him “not only to laugh again in the teeth of disaster, but to *love* all suffering and death, as an essential part of the beauty of the whole.”²⁴ John’s description of the enlightenment he experiences after killing the stag can be seen as another reiteration of Stapledon’s idea of ecstasy: “It’s doing everything that comes along to be done, and doing it not only with all one’s might but with – spiritual taste, discrimination, *full* consciousness of what one is doing . . . It’s – praise of life, and of all things in their true setting.”²⁵

Having reached enlightenment, John telepathically makes contact with other supernormals in the world. A small group coalesce around him, including a new-born infant

²² Olaf Stapledon, *Odd John*, p. 66.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

²⁴ Leslie A. Fiedler, *Olaf Stapledon, A Man Divided*, p. 114.

²⁵ Olaf Stapledon, *Odd John*, p. 111.

that one of the supernormals thinks will eventually “outclass them all.”²⁶ Although Stapledon doesn’t dwell on it, this is a clear nod to the *younger=more powerful* equation I discussed in the introduction, whereby the lack of worldly experience is a source of increased strength. Once the group has formed, the supernormals set out in a boat to start a colony. Along the way they carry out more killings, including the machine-gunning of a pair of shipwrecked sailors they fear will bring them publicity, and the hypnotically suggested suicide of the inhabitants of the island they wish to take over.

All of these killings, carried out in cold blood, raise profound moral questions for the reader. For Rabkin, they indicate that “Stapledon’s position seems to be an almost Nietzschean belief that superior beings are free from the moral codes of inferior beings.”²⁷ Fielder agrees, saying Stapledon is a “shameless elitist – in the suspect tradition of Nietzsche,” who believes that the “more fully awakened” are free from the rules the rest of us have to follow.²⁸ While there’s much to this, I cannot completely agree with Rabkin and Fielder’s readings. I argue that the killings John perpetrates have to be seen in the context of Stapledon’s philosophic quest to form his own faith. Brian Stableford offers some useful insights here, when he draws a comparison between Stapledon and other writers of who have imagined a new race of supermen. For many of them, the violence and cruelty they observed in their fellow men was but “a brutal inheritance to be transcended in time by more admirable descendants.”²⁹ Stapledon, on the other hand, “could not think of this element of nastiness in the business of living as something which would simply be put away one day.”³⁰ Instead:

²⁶ Olaf Stapledon, *Odd John*, p. 157.

²⁷ Eric S. Rabkin, “The Composite Fiction of Olaf Stapledon,” *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 3 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/4239499>> [accessed 20 October 2018] p. 245.

²⁸ Leslie A. Fiedler, *Olaf Stapledon, A Man Divided*, p. 117.

²⁹ Brian Stableford, *Scientific Romances in Britain 1890-1950*, p. 208.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

“The spiritual awakening which Stapledon looked forward to would not be an awakening into saintliness, but rather to an acceptance of the inherent ugliness of certain aspects of experience. . . when he tried to put things into the greatest possible perspective, he felt required to account for the phenomena of pain and violence, and in doing so he clearly felt unable to take the ‘easy way out.’ The nasty side of John’s character, and the pusillanimity of the character who reports back to the reader, are evidence of the keenness with which Stapledon felt this particular problem.”³¹

In this reading, then, the killings that John commits are not simply a sign of a Nietzschean belief in the absence of rules for supermen, but instead the sign of a writer struggling to fit everything, however brutal, into his theology. As I mentioned in the introduction, the 1930s were a time when the evil side of the human character was felt to be very much on the surface, and Stapledon was bound to reflect this. Also, it should be noted that John’s realization that he must love “all suffering and death, as an essential part of the beauty of the whole” extends to his own death too, and those of his fellow supernormals, not just the death of ‘inferior’ beings.³² Ecstasy in the acceptance of *everything*, even your own demise.

It should be noted too, that John and his followers believe themselves to be a different species to *Homo sapiens*. When talking to the narrator about killing the sailors, John says “Had we been members of your species . . . what we did would have been a crime . . . But just as you kill wolves and tigers so that the far brighter spirits of men may flourish, so we killed those unfortunate creatures that we rescued.”³³ Thus, John recasts the ethical question in the evolutionary terms of conflict between two competing species. For John, it was self-

³¹ Olaf Stapledon, *Odd John*, p. 209.

³² Leslie A. Fiedler, *Olaf Stapledon, A Man Divided*, p. 114.

³³ Olaf Stapledon, *Odd John*, p. 159.

defence on the part of the *Homo superiors*: “if we could wipe out your whole species, frankly, we would. For if your species discovers us, and realizes at all what we are, it will certainly destroy us.” This is the same argument seen later in John Wyndham’s *The Midwich Cuckoos*, which likewise reframes a moral question in terms of inter-species conflict. In this view, killing is not a matter of right and wrong, but a simple necessity in the struggle for existence.

With the colony founded, John and his counterparts embark on a supreme spiritual task. Although the exact nature of the spiritual task is vague, it appears to be further related to Stapledon’s mood of ecstasy, and concerns understanding “existence as precisely and zestfully as they could,” and saluting “That in the universe which was of supreme excellence.”³⁴ When they’re threatened by the outside world, however, instead of fighting back, as well they might, the supernormals commit suicide together by blowing up their island. John’s rationale for this is that the years of warfare necessary to defeat the “normal” humans would leave them “ruined, hopelessly distorted in spirit.”³⁵ Their youth is also a factor in the decision. “Perhaps if we were all thirty years older we should be sufficiently mature to pass through a decade of warfare without becoming too impoverished, spiritually, for our real work.”³⁶ Unwilling to risk spiritual pollution, the children instead end their brief, bloody careers as new humans in a ball of flames.

The fact that the spiritual task of the ending remains so vague is in a large part due to Stapledon’s deliberate use of an inept narrator. As Roberts says, *Odd John* is “a narrative that denies its own representational ground.”³⁷ The narrator, who is unnamed, but called Fido by John, tells us from the very start that he’s a “very incompetent biographer,” who “failed to

³⁴ Olaf Stapledon, *Odd John*, p. 191.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p 197.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p 197.

³⁷ Adam Roberts, “Introduction,” *Odd John*, p. viii.

understand the essential John.”³⁸ He can tell us that John reached enlightenment in the wilderness, but the “actual nature of that enlightenment I find it impossible to conceive.”³⁹ Stapledon uses this unreliable narrator for two particular ends. First, it allows him to suggest the unknowable superiority of John without losing verisimilitude. If John is so far advanced of us normal humans that he can be considered a different species, then it makes sense that the narrator, and therefore the reader, cannot fully comprehend him. This makes *Odd John* similar to *The Hampdenshire Wonder*, which also used its narrator’s inability to understand the superchild as a way of suggesting intellectual superiority and unknowability.

Second, as Fiedler says, Stapledon uses the “rather old-fashioned device . . . in which the adventures of a more than normally brilliant protagonist are related by a more than normally dull adulator” as a way of maintaining some sympathy with John.⁴⁰ “Like his prototype, Dr. Watson, [the unnamed narrator] leaves the reader feeling superior to him, and therefore less likely to resent the arrogance of the protagonist.”⁴¹ This works up to a point. The narrator’s inability to understand the simplest theory John expounds certainly makes us feel superior to him, but I’m not sure it reduces a readers resentment towards John’s arrogance. John’s endless putting down of *Homo sapiens* is grating after a while, and led one reviewer at the time to call John “an infant prodigy of the most objectionable sort.”⁴²

As well as his unreliability, the narrator is notable for his willingness to excuse John’s action throughout the book. He’s constantly “apologising for his censorious reactions, admitting that his revulsion is merely a symptom of his inferiority.”⁴³ Although he’s initially shocked when John tells him about machine-gunning the sailors, he soon relents: “Though I

³⁸ Olaf Stapledon, *Odd John*, p. 2.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

⁴⁰ Leslie A. Fiedler, *Olaf Stapledon, A Man Divided*, p. 108.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

⁴² M.D. Cole, quoted in Leslie A. Fiedler, *Olaf Stapledon, A Man Divided*, p. 105.

⁴³ Brian Stableford, *Scientific Romances in Britain 1890-1950*, p. 270.

cannot approve, I cannot condemn. There must surely be some aspect that I am too stupid or insensitive to grasp. John, I feel, *must* be right.”⁴⁴ Likewise, when John tells him how the supernormals hypnotised the native inhabitants of the island into throwing themselves on the fire, the narrator is quick to look for excuses. He imagines what would have happened if John and his group had been the more usual group of colonist, who “would probably have baptised the natives, given them prayer books and European clothes, rum and all the diseases of the White Man.”⁴⁵ At least, he says, the supernormals did it in “the cleanest possible way,” before once again denying his own ability to pass moral judgement, “who am I that I should judge beings who in daily contact with me constantly proved themselves my superiors not only in intelligence but in moral insight?”⁴⁶

The narrator’s willingness to kowtow to the supernormals is perhaps the most troubling aspect of *Odd John*. By refusing to condemn John’s action, the narrator is essentially a traitor to his own species, and that, combined with the power John has over him, makes him a pitiful figure. As Swanson says, it “makes a cruel sense that a super-species should kill a subspecies as a means of survival. What cannot make sense is a conscious and willing acceptance of its own immolation.”⁴⁷ Fiedler argues that by allowing us to identify with the supernormal and his willing victim, “*Odd John* functions much like pornography: permitting us to indulge simultaneously the sadist daydream of exercising absolute power over an adoring victim and masochist reverie of submitting absolutely to the power of such a beloved.”⁴⁸ I think this might be overstating the case, but the interplay between two largely

⁴⁴ Olaf Stapledon, *Odd John*, p. 160.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

⁴⁷ Roy Arthur Swanson, “The Spiritual Factor in ‘Odd John and Sirius,’” *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 3. <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/4239504>> [accessed: 20 October 2018] p. 290.

⁴⁸ Leslie A. Fiedler, *Olaf Stapledon, A Man Divided*, p. 118.

unlikeable characters certainly makes *Odd John* an unsettling work, a reflection, perhaps, of the unsettling times it was written in.

As I have shown, *Odd John* is deeply rooted in Stapledon's philosophy, and expresses his conviction "that the future of man would not simply be an extension of past history, but must involve some kind of gradual spiritual awakening . . . which might one day give the descendants of men an intuitive hotline to enlightenment."⁴⁹ John voices this conviction in the middle of the novel, telling the narrator that "If the species as a whole, or a large proportion of the world population, were to be divinely inspired, so that their nature became truly human at a stride, all would soon be well."⁵⁰ John is pessimistic about this happening, and the fact that his own enlightenment, and that of the other supernormals, is cut off before reaching full maturity perhaps points at Stapledon's own pessimism too. Odd John may be a child reaching for the stars, but he is ultimately unable to complete his transcendence. There is one tantalizing option that Odd John imagines though: "I thought I should simply take charge of the world and help *Homo sapiens* to remake himself on a more human plan. But now I realize that only what men call 'God' could do that. Unless perhaps a great invasion of superior beings from another planet, or another dimension, could do it."⁵¹ Stapledon takes this idea no further, but it is this very option that forms the basis of the next novel up for study, *Childhood's End* (1953).

⁴⁹ Brian Stableford, *Scientific Romances in Britain 1890-1950*, p. 201.

⁵⁰ Olaf Stapledon, *Odd John* p. 86.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

Chapter 3.

Childhood's End

So far I have covered two superchildren who have failed to find a place in the world, having both been extinguished before reaching full maturity. *Childhood's End* is therefore the first success story among my chosen texts, showing all children under ten splitting away from their parent species in “an impersonal, all-encompassing transcendence of individual beings.”¹ The nature of this transcendence is deeply rooted in a spiritual, mystical tradition, and the novel makes it clear that science will not be the leading force in the evolution of the species, rather, the purely rational, empirical mind, is something to be overcome. Thus, with its ambivalence about science, and focus on evolutionary themes, *Childhood's End* not only fits well into the British tradition of scientific romance, but arguably takes the transcendental strain of it initiated by Wells to a dramatic climax.

Before the final transcendence can occur, however, humanity is first kept in a guided “cuckoo phase” by a superior alien race called the Overlords, who constitute the “great invasion of superior beings from another planet” that Odd John thought could help remake *Homo sapiens*.² The effect of their arrival on humanity is the main focus for most of the book, with the superchildren only emerging in the last sixty pages of the novel. In some ways, then, it is the Overlords, rather than the superchildren, who embody the themes and ideas seen in the previous novels. For instance, it is the Overlords who possess the higher

¹ Peter Nicholls and John Clute, “Clarke, Arthur C.,” *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, eds. John Clute, David Langford, Peter Nicholls and Graham Sleight. (London: Gollancz, 31 Aug. 2018) <http://www.sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/clarke_arthur_c> [accessed 28 February 2019]

² Olaf Stapledon, *Odd John*, p. 87.

intelligence seen in Victor Stott, and their wielding of it leads to a situation imagined by Beresford some forty years earlier.

With the Overlords' arrival, "nations knew they no longer needed to fear one another," and world peace is secured.³ The Overlords then use their superior technology to create a Utopia, filled with wonders such as "air-cars" and automatic factories that "poured forth consumer goods in such unending streams that all the ordinary necessities of life were virtually free."⁴ Clarke describes it as a Golden Age for man, a world where "ignorance, disease, poverty and fear had virtually ceased to exist."⁵ There is a down side, however, for the Overlords' intelligent stewardship also creates a mental vacuum. Echoing Challis's fears that Victor Stott's intelligence would "mean the end of research, philosophy, all the mystery, idealism, and joy of life," Clarke tells us how "the heart had been taken out of fundamental scientific research. It seemed futile to spend a lifetime searching for secrets that the Overlords had probably uncovered ages before."⁶ Challis thought we should "all perish through sheer inanity, or die desperately by suicide if no mystery remained in the world."⁷ In *Childhood's End*, the result is less dramatic; people take up a variety of sports and leisure activities, all in an effort to stave off the "supreme enemy of all Utopias – boredom."⁸

All of this can be contrasted with the superchildren who emerge at the end, who are not characterised as possessing superior intelligence, at least not in any form we could understand. Karellen, the Overlords' leader, tells the adults that "You have given birth to your successors, and it is your tragedy that you will never understand them – will never even be able to communicate with their minds . . . You will not think them human, and you will be

³ Arthur C. Clarke, *Childhood's End*, p. 22.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁶ J. D. Beresford, *The Hampdenshire Wonder*, pp. 153-154; Arthur C. Clarke, *Childhood's End*, p. 82.

⁷ J. D. Beresford, *The Hampdenshire Wonder*, p. 253.

⁸ Arthur C. Clarke, *Childhood's End*, p. 82.

right.”⁹ The children become, in fact, far more alien than the Overlords, who are at least superior in a recognisable way, being equipped with detectably greater wisdom and technology. I have already explored the theme of unknowability in relation to Victor Stott and Odd John, but here Clarke takes it to a new height. Karellen’s speech makes clear that there can be no hope of communication with the superchildren in *Childhood’s End*, and the adults have a complete lack of insight into the world they inhabit.

The case of higher intelligence, then, acts as one example of how the Overlords embody the themes seen in other superchild fiction while the superchildren themselves progress much further than their literary predecessors. Another example of this is in the relationship between the unevolved mass of adult humanity and the superior beings. Odd John, and to a lesser extent, Victor Stott, had something like a master/pet relationship with the unevolved. This was best demonstrated by their interactions with the narrators. Odd John’s nickname for the narrator was “Fido,” and he repeatedly characterised him as a “faithful hound.”¹⁰ This dynamic is less overt in *The Hampdenshire Wonder*, though Victor Stott does make the narrator feel like “an undeveloped animal . . . a creature of small possibilities,” and the way he follows Victor around on country walks also suggests a certain doggish devotion.¹¹ In *Childhood’s End*, it is again the Overlords who embody this theme, rather than the superchildren. The Overlords have a “humorous affection for the little creatures crawling on the planet beneath,”¹² which one of the characters describes as “the affection of a man for a devoted and intelligent dog.”¹³ This relationship is made even clearer at the end. When the superchildren finally emerge, Karellen wonders what to do with the remainder of *Homo sapiens*, saying: “It would be simplest, perhaps, and most merciful, to

⁹ Arthur C. Clarke, *Childhood’s End*, p. 216.

¹⁰ Olaf Stapledon, *Odd John*, p. 22.

¹¹ J. D. Beresford, *The Hampdenshire Wonder*, p. 221.

¹² Arthur C. Clarke, *Childhood’s End*, p. 15.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

destroy you – as you yourselves would destroy a mortally wounded pet you loved.”¹⁴ There is also a literal master/pet relationship in the closing section between Jeff, the first child on Earth to start down the road to transcendence, and his faithful dog, who howls in dismay when Jeff starts to change and is taken away. This serves to underscore the relationship between the Overlords and the adults, and “reminds us that many humans are like dogs (at least some of the time). In a godless twentieth century, many yearn for someone to love them and tell them what to do, while accepting their limitations and lifting from their shoulders the responsibility for deciding their own fate.”¹⁵ Humans, then, are like pets in *Childhood's End*, happy with the material wealth and security the Overlords provide, and trusting their future to them.

Again, this is contrasted with the relationship between the superchildren and the unevolved. The children display none of the “humorous affection” the Overlords or Odd John demonstrated, nor the condescension that Victor Stott displayed. Instead, from the moment they begin to transform, they ignore their parents completely, having moved “beyond their assistance, and beyond their love.”¹⁶ This can be best seen in the passages concerning Jeff's little sister. The infant Jennifer, or, as Clarke puts it, “the entity that had once been Jennifer,” sleeps in her cot:

but even in its sleeping chrysalis state it already had enough control of its environment to take care of all its needs. Jean had only once attempted to

¹⁴ Arthur C. Clarke, *Childhood's End*, p. 216.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Anne Hull, “Fire and Ice: The Ironic Imagery of Arthur C. Clarke's "Childhood's End"”, *Extrapolation* (Spring 1983) <Periodicals Archive Online> [accessed 28 February 2019] p. 16.

¹⁶ Arthur C. Clarke, *Childhood's End*, p. 209.

feed it, without success. It chose to take nourishment in its own time, and in its own manner.¹⁷

For Tisdall, this “lack of dependency on adults removes [the children] from the category of normal childhood altogether.”¹⁸ This is proven in the text a few pages later, when Clarke tells us that they are “no longer children, whatever they might be.”¹⁹

It is this complete break with *Homo sapiens* that marks the superchildren in *Childhood's End* out as different from those found in other superchild texts. In the novel's climax, the children transcend matter altogether, becoming a single collective consciousness and merging with the Overmind, an amorphous, composite being made up of many races. Before this final transcendence takes place, they must first shed all traces of individuality. The last human left on Earth sees them “merging into a common mold” and Karellen tells him that they have “no more identity than the cells in your body.”²⁰ Soon after they ascend to space in a column of light, using the substance of the planet as fuel in a final disavowal of matter.

This all stands in stark contrast to the superchildren I have looked at so far. Odd John may telepathically link with his supernormal comrades in a similar manner as Clarke's superchildren, and he may be described as belonging to a different species too, but in the end, he's still shackled to a recognisably human body, as is the poignantly lonely Victor Stott. *Childhood's End* is perhaps the ultimate expression of the *younger = more powerful* equation

¹⁷ Arthur C. Clarke, *Childhood's End*, p. 209.

¹⁸ Laura Tisdall, “The psychologist, the psychoanalyst and the ‘extraordinary child’ in postwar British science fiction”, *Med Humanities* (4 November 2016) <<http://mh.bmj.com/>> [accessed 11 December 2018] p. e7.

¹⁹ Arthur C. Clarke, *Childhood's End*, p. 219.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 238-239.

that is at the heart of these superchild texts. The transformation touches no one over the age of ten; only those pre-puberty, pre-“fall” have the power to change. The superchildren’s youth allows them to transcend humanity as we know it, not just gain a fleeting superiority in the manner of Odd John or Victor Stott. This equating of youth with power, or more specifically, the lack of knowledge with power, can be seen clearly in the character of Jennifer. As I noted in the introduction, she starts to change after her brother, Jeff, but Clarke tells us that “soon she would pass her brother, for she had so much less to unlearn.”²¹

The appearance of the superchildren reveals the true role of the Overlords. They are not the all-powerful, autonomous masters humans imagined them to be, but agents of the Overmind working as “midwives attending a difficult birth.”²² It’s a phrase that brings to mind Jung’s idea of the child as “*renatus in novam infantiam*,” or “reborn into a new infancy.”²³ Under the Overlords’ watchful gaze, humanity’s childhood is ending as we’re reborn into a new embryonic stage. The children are both beginning and end, an idea echoed by the destruction of a volcanic island by some of the adults, who much like Odd John and his colony, blow themselves and the island up: “The Island had been born in fire; in fire it chose to die.”²⁴ This imagery of simultaneous destruction and creation also features in the superchildren’s ascent to the stars, when they leech away the last atoms of Earth to nourish them “as the food stored in a grain of wheat feeds the infant plant while it climbs towards the Sun.”²⁵

The final transcendence also brings about a reversal in status, and begs the question who the superior species really is. After all, humans are able to join the Overmind, while the Overlords are not. For all their highly developed intelligence, they’re trapped in an

²¹ Arthur C. Clarke, *Childhood’s End*, p. 204.

²² Ibid., p. 206.

²³ C.G Jung, “The Psychology of the Child Archetype”, p. 97.

²⁴ Arthur C. Clarke, *Childhood’s End*, p. 220.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 255.

“evolutionary cul-de-sac,” which represents “the logical extension of the glorification and development of the individual ego.”²⁶ Humans, on the other hand, at least, all of them under ten, are able to combine forces and merge with the Overmind, an act that “represents a continuation of the human spirit,” even if it is a form no human would recognise.²⁷ As Karellen tells the last humans “When our race is forgotten, part of yours will still exist.”²⁸ Perhaps this is why the last human left alive sees the transcendence as “not tragedy but fulfilment.”²⁹ The human race is capable of growth, while the Overlords are not.

As well as bringing into question the assumed superiority of the Overlords, the emergence of the superchildren also casts the events of the novel before it in a new light. Looking back, the Golden Age humanity lived through can be considered an elongated “cuckoo phase,” though one with an important difference. Unlike Odd John, or the other superchildren covered later in this study, the cuckoo phase of the superchildren in *Childhood's End* is not something adopted by them as a protective mechanism. It is forced upon them by the Overlords, who withhold all knowledge of the power inherent within humanity until it has already started to appear in children around the world.

This “cuckoo phase” in *Childhood's End* is linked with the idea of neoteny, with the entire human race being kept in a juvenile state in order to allow the right conditions for the superchildren to develop. Karellen explains that the Overlords deliberately made humanity “mark time while those powers developed, until they could come flooding out into the channels that were being prepared for them.”³⁰ Clarke cleverly foreshadows this eventual revelation throughout the book. When one character chafes against the Overlords’ rule, he

²⁶ Arthur C. Clarke, *Childhood's End*, p. 206 ; Elizabeth Anne Hull, “Fire and Ice: The Ironic Imagery of Arthur C. Clarke's "Childhood's End"”, p. 21.

²⁷ John Huntington, “The Unity of "Childhood's End"”, *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Spring 1974) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/4238857>> [accessed 20 September 2018] p. 158.

²⁸ Arthur C. Clarke, *Childhood's End*, p. 217.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 241.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 214.

uses imagery of childhood, saying “Probably the Overlords have their reasons for keeping us in the nursery.”³¹ Another character also has an inkling of humanity’s status, and uses the same kind of ironic and symbolic language: “it seemed to him that men were like children amusing themselves in some secluded playground, protected from the fierce realities of the outer world.”³² The childhood of humanity that the transcendence brings to a close, is, in part, an infant state imposed from without as much as it is a state imposed by our own innate limitations.

The arrival of the Overlords is triggered by man’s newfound ability to travel into space. In the early sections, it appears that their objective is to stop man from spreading atomic violence into the universe. The Overlords ban nuclear weapons, and utter their famous dictum that “the stars are not for Man.”³³ When the superchildren start emerging, however, we learn that our science was never a threat, it was our “powers of the mind.”³⁴ Karellen says researchers into paranormal activity had been “tampering with the lock of Pandora’s box”:

The forces they may have unleashed transcended any perils that the atom could have brought. For the physicists could only have ruined the Earth: the parapsychicists could have spread havoc to the stars . . . you might have become a telepathic cancer, a malignant mentality which in its inevitable dissolution would have poisoned other and greater minds.³⁵

This is a remarkable reaffirmation of the type of “secular faiths” that Beresford and other Edwardians were interested in. It’s these “powers of the mind,” these paranormal

³¹ Arthur C. Clarke, *Childhood’s End* p. 141.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 176.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 213.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 213.

abilities, that allow the children of mankind to join the Overmind and transcend ordinary humanity. It's also the power that the Overlords lack, and which keeps them in the rational, science-led "evolutionary cul-de-sac."

This ambivalence the novel shows towards science, which can offer material comfort or destruction but never the evolutionary development of the species, places it in the same bracket as Wells, Beresford, and Stapledon. That the evolution of the superchildren in *Childhood's End* is so deeply rooted in "a spiritual, mystical – not empirical – view of life," makes it a fascinating example of the transcendent superchild.³⁶ The obliteration of the individual ego and comingling with a higher being that occurs at the end is almost a religious experience, and perhaps explains why Nicholls and Clute described *Childhood's End* as the "the closest thing sf has yet produced to an analogy for religion, and the longing for God."³⁷ They also suggest that *Childhood's End* is one of two books that Clarke published in 1953 "in which he comes close to bringing the tradition of the UK Scientific Romance to its natural climax."³⁸ Certainly it is the furthest reaching expression of the superchild character that I have studied in this dissertation, taking the Wellsian image of a child reaching for the stars to an apocalyptic conclusion.

For all its roots in the older scientific romance tradition, *Childhood's End* is still very much a product of the 1950s. The novel is suffused with Cold War anxiety, evidenced by the introductory chapter in which Russian and American scientists compete to be the first to launch a rocket to the moon. Hollow sees *Childhood's End* as a "magnificently desperate attempt to continue to hope for the future for the race in the face of mounting evidence to the

³⁶ David Dalglish, "The Ambivalent Paradise: or, Nature and the Transcendent in British SF," *Extrapolation*, Vol.34 (Winter 1997) <<https://doi.org/10.3828/extr.1997.38.4.327>> [accessed 21 July 2019] p. 336.

³⁷ Peter Nicholls and John Clute, "Clarke, Arthur C." *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*.

³⁸ Ibid.

contrary.”³⁹ It can also be seen as a plea for cooperation in an era marked by division. Likewise, although *Childhood's End* fits well into the scientific romance tradition, Clarke's work as a whole reflects Stableford's observation that “most of the speculative fiction published in Britain after 1950 was shaped in accordance with the rather different tradition of American science fiction.”⁴⁰ Much of Clarke's early work appeared in American pulp magazines, including “The Guardian Angel,” the short story that served as the basis for *Childhood's End*, which appeared in *Famous FANTASTIC Mysteries* in 1950. Given the fame of the later novel, it's surprising that Clarke didn't gain a place on the cover with “The Guardian Angel.” Instead the cover spot was given to one John Benyon, was who later to find fame as my next author in this study, John Wyndham.

³⁹ John Hollow, *Against the night, the stars: the science fiction of Arthur C. Clarke*, (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983) p. 66.

⁴⁰ Brian Stableford, *Scientific Romances in Britain 1890-1950*, p. 321.

Chapter 4.

The Midwich Cuckoos

John Wyndham had been publishing short fiction in American pulp magazines under the name John Beynon, or John Beynon Harris, since the early 1930s.¹ In keeping with much of the writing in American pulp magazines at the time, these early tales were mainly “space operas leavened with the occasional witty aside or passage.”² World War Two not only interrupted his writing activities (he saw active service and participated in the D-Day landings), it acted as a dividing line between his two careers. When he changed his pen name to John Wyndham, he also changed his style, and “for at least a decade from about 1950 his novels can properly be thought in terms of the Scientific Romance.”³ Unlike Clarke, however, who drew more from Stapledon’s iteration of the tradition, John Wyndham returned to the source, and mined the ideas and themes seen in the early romances of H.G. Wells, which were, in a large part, inspired themselves by the teachings of Huxley. Taken as a whole, Wyndham’s work from 1950s is a reaffirmation of Nature as “red in tooth and claw,” to use the Tennysonian phrase oft quoted by evolutionists.⁴

The Midwich Cuckoos is a case in point. The invasion of an English village by a race of superchildren poses the village’s inhabitants with a dilemma: of what use are civilized ideals in the face of an evolutionary threat? The notion of ‘civilized’ values, and their contrasting with ‘primitive’ ones, are central to the novel, so it is worth taking some time to

¹ His full name is John Wyndham Parkes Lucas Beynon Harris.

² John Clute, "Wyndham, John", *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, eds. John Clute, David Langford, Peter Nicholls and Graham Sleight (London: Gollancz, updated 10 August 2018.) <http://www.sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/wyndham_john>. [accessed 15 August 2019]

³ Ibid.

⁴ Alfred Lord Tennyson, ‘In Memoriam,’ LVI <https://archive.org/stream/inmemoriambyalfr00tenuoft/inmemoriambyalfr00tenuoft_djvu.txt> [accessed: 25 August 2019]

define them within the context of the work. Perhaps the best definition is provided by an army colonel who tries to reason with the Children. “This is a civilised country, and famous for its ability to find compromise . . . History has shown us to be more tolerant of minorities than most.”⁵ Despite the dubiousness of the last claim, the colonel gives us an idea of Britain’s conception of itself - that is, as tolerant and willing to compromise in order to keep the peace. If these values are ‘civilised,’ and we accept the idea that to be ‘primitive’ is to be the opposite, then it follows that to be ‘primitive’ is to be intolerant of difference, uncompromising, and violent. These, then, are the parameters which the characters are operating within. There is one extra factor in play too: in *The Midwich Cuckoos*, to be primitive is also to be closer to Nature, and the “processes of fantastic horror” that sustain it.⁶ As the squire Zellaby says, “it is because Nature is ruthless, hideous, and cruel beyond belief that it was necessary to invent civilization.”⁷

These ideas of civilized versus primitive values are also tied up in Britain and its role as an imperial power. I have already explained in the introduction how Darwinian theory and the idea of recapitulation were used as justification for the imperial mission. In the Victorian view, “the ‘savage’/‘primitive’ was at the base of a social and moral trajectory, which led through several stages to the ultimate goal of civilisation, represented by Victorian England.”⁸ It was therefore the duty of the British to ‘civilize’ the rest of the world through “imperial diffusion of English attitudes, morals and culture.”⁹ The belief that “Britain was the hub of the Western world” took a knock in the 1950s, with the rise of America as a

⁵ John Wyndham, *The Midwich Cuckoos*, p. 198.

⁶ Ibid., p. 112.

⁷ Ibid., p. 112.

⁸ Richard Hingley, “Britannia, Origin Myths and the British Empire,” *TRAC 94: Proceedings of the Fourth Annual Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference, Durham 1994*, ed. Cottam, S., Dungworth, D., Scott, S., and Taylor, J (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 1995) < http://doi.org/10.16995/TRAC1994_11_23 > [accessed 15 August 2019] p. 13.

⁹ Ibid., p. 13.

superpower and the rapidly dissolving empire leading many to question where Britain now stood in the pecking order, but the central notion that Britain was an exceedingly ‘civilized’ country was still widespread.¹⁰ *The Midwich Cuckoos* critiques these ideas of British superiority in interesting ways. In the opening pages, Midwich is described as “a place where things did not happen,” an archetypal sleepy village in a “thousand-year doze.”¹¹ It is “emblematic of merry Olde English complacency,” and by choosing to have his alien Children arrive there, Wyndham is mounting an attack on British self-satisfaction.¹² This self-satisfaction is attacked again when the villagers find out there are other groups of children around the world. For most of the novel, the characters had assumed, “with typical self-involved, parochial British complacency, that the Children born in their village are a unique phenomenon, that the aliens naturally chose hardy British peasant stock as the gene pool for their new species.”¹³ Their reaction is one of shock when they find out this isn’t true. “Oh, vanity, vanity...!” Zellaby cries, realising that he is just as guilty of complacency as any of the other villagers.¹⁴

As we’ve already seen in the work of Clarke, the 1950s were also a time of great anxiety about the Cold War and the possibility of nuclear annihilation. *The Midwich Cuckoos* touches on both of these, making “much of the environmental traces of a space ship in the village,” and peppering “its conversations with references to gaseous contaminations, X- and gamma rays.”¹⁵ This shows an ambivalence towards science typical of scientific romance, as does one soldier who grumbles about “these scientist fellers in back rooms ruining the

¹⁰ Richard Overy, *The Morbid Age*, p. 7.

¹¹ John Wyndham, *The Midwich Cuckoos*, pp. 11 and 53.

¹² David Dalglish, “The Ambivalent Paradise, p. 337.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 338.

¹⁴ John Wyndham, *The Midwich Cuckoos*, p. 189.

¹⁵ Steven Bruhm, “The Global Village of the Damned: A Counter-Narrative for the Post-War Child,” *Narrative*, Volume 24, Number 2, (May 2016) <<https://doi.org/10.1353/nar.2016.0013>> [accessed 31 May 2019] p. 160.

profession.”¹⁶ Another abiding concern of the novel is secrecy. In the early sections, when the village of Midwich mysteriously falls asleep, a soldier says “for all we know it may be some little trick of our own gone wrong. So much damned secrecy nowadays that nobody knows anything.”¹⁷ The government puts a gag order on the press to prevent the news leaking out, and are aided by the residents of Midwich, who want to keep the whole thing amongst themselves, lest the neighbouring villages gossip. Wyndham worked in Censorship during the war, which is perhaps where his interest in secrecy started, but it was part of a larger attitude at the time. “Never know what these Ivans are up to,” one soldier remarks, hinting at the paranoid secrecy of the Cold War era.¹⁸

As well as being a time of Cold War paranoia, where frightening technological advances and secrecy went hand in hand, the 1950s was a time of growing anxiety around children. In *The Midwich Cuckoos* we are “forcibly reminded that Wyndham was writing at a time when the emergence of the “teenager” and the first stirrings of a rebellious youth culture were provoking social unease.”¹⁹ Wyndham tells us that the Children have “a different sense of community,” and that “their ties to one another are far more important to them than any feeling for ordinary homes,” a good a description as any of the gangs of youths who would soon cause much handwringing in the Western world.²⁰ Likewise, when a character remarks on “the child-adult combination,” which “knocked away all the props from the right order of things,” it’s hard not to think of the teenager; not yet a productive adult, but definitely no

¹⁶ John Wyndham, *The Midwich Cuckoos*, p. 35.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 35.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 38.

¹⁹ Rowland Wymer, “How Safe is John Wyndham? A Closer Look at his Work, with Particular Reference to *The Chrysalids*”, *Foundation* (Summer 1992) < <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxye.bham.ac.uk/docview/1312018457?accountid=8630> > [accessed 25 May 2019] p. 28.

²⁰ John Wyndham, *The Midwich Cuckoos*, p. 131.

longer a child, and as alien to their parents' values and ideals as anything that emerged from a spaceship.²¹

The Children in *The Midwich Cuckoos* are foisted on the quiet village during a "Dayout," when anyone within the invisible dome around the village is knocked unconscious. The use of the term "Dayout" here is reminiscent of the common command given to children, "lights out," as well as the common event in the life of a child, "to have a day out." The description mentioned earlier of Midwich being a "sleepy village" is also given a literal twist in this section.

During the "Dayout," every woman of childbearing age becomes pregnant. "In effect, they have all been unwittingly, even cosily, raped."²² The peculiar parthenogenesis, as well as the sighting of a flying saucer in the centre of the dome's area, suggests an alien visitation. The villagers await anxiously to see the fruits of the "Dayout," and are relieved to find them "Perfect, 'cept for golden eyes."²³ The relief is short-lived, however, as the children start developing at twice the normal rate and begin to use their powers of compulsion. This is a reversal of the development seen in the other superchildren so far. Odd John and Victor Stott both developed slower than usual, and in the former's case, this neoteny was the source of much of his power, allowing his mind to grow in strength. The Children are clearly a different breed, a vigorous species born with their powers already in full bloom.

The first character to recognize the true nature of the Children is Gordon Zellaby, the educated master of Kyle Manor. "All these sixty-one golden-eyed children we have here are intruders, changelings: they are cuckoo children."²⁴ As well as recognising their true status,

²¹ John Wyndham, *The Midwich Cuckoos*, p. 196.

²² David Ketterer, "'A part of the...family[?]'": John Wyndham's *The Midwich Cuckoos* as Estranged Autobiography", *Learning From Other Worlds*, ed. Patrick Parrinder (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001) p. 148.

²³ John Wyndham, *The Midwich Cuckoos*, p. 89.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 106.

Zellaby recognises that the Children will have to be dealt with eventually. “Cuckoos are very determined survivors. So determined that there is really only one thing to be done with them once one’s nest is infected.”²⁵ For Zellaby, it is not a matter for debate but a simple truth of Nature: “There is no concept more fallacious than the sense of cosiness implied by ‘Mother Nature’. Each species must strive to survive, and that it will do, by every means in its power, however foul.”²⁶ Zellaby then, has already realised that survival is a “primitive matter,” where the laws of Nature override the laws of civilization.²⁷

Wymer has noted that Zellaby “acts as Wyndham’s mouthpiece in *The Midwich Cuckoos*,” and he’s backed up by Ketterer, who says that “Zellaby’s ultra-rational opinions are Harris’s.”²⁸ Zellaby’s set-piece speeches are the thematic heart of Wyndham’s novel, cropping up regularly to comment and expand on the novel’s action, and expressing the author’s “completely consistent and bleakly Darwinian view of life as a ceaseless and ruthless struggle for existence waged between competing species and governed by biological rather than moral imperatives.”²⁹ It’s these moral imperatives, however, as well as the human appearance of the intruder, which complicate the biological issue of species survival for Zellaby and the other adults in Midwich.

In another of his set-piece speeches, Zellaby, neatly summarises the adults’ dilemma: “On the one hand, it is our duty to our race and culture to liquidate the children . . . On the other hand, it is our culture that gives us scruples about the ruthless liquidation of unarmed minorities.”³⁰ To highlight the fact that he’s talking about “our culture,” that is British democracy, Wyndham details how different cultures around the world have dealt with them.

²⁵ John Wyndham, *The Midwich Cuckoos*, p. 113.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

²⁸ Rowland Wymer, “How Safe is John Wyndham?” p. 27; David Ketterer, “‘A part of the...family’”, p. 150. (Ketterer is here using Wyndham’s real surname)

²⁹ Rowland Wymer, “How Safe is John Wyndham?” p. 26.

³⁰ John Wyndham, *The Midwich Cuckoos*, p. 208.

A settlement of Eskimos, for example, were “so outraged, or perhaps alarmed, at the arrival of babies so unlike their own kind that they exposed them almost at once. At any rate, none survived.”³¹ In Russia, an entire town, with all of its inhabitants, was wiped off the map by an atomic cannon in order to destroy the children that appeared there without warning them first.

The message here is clear. More ‘primitive’ societies, which in Wyndham’s terms means closer to Nature, more intolerant of difference, and uncompromising, are able to deal with the problem quickly. The Russians, with their belief that the individual serves the state, not the other way round, are willing to sacrifice innocent citizens to rid themselves of the Children. In *The Midwich Cuckoos*, then, “the establishment of democracy is analogous to the overdeveloped antlers of the Irish Elk, an evolutionary embellishment that sentences its owners to extinction when conditions change.”³² The Children tell the colonel as much: “As a securely dominant species you could afford to lose touch with reality, and amuse yourself with abstractions.”³³ Because of the political implications for any government considering such a measure, and because of our ‘civilized’ ideas of tolerance and compromise, the brutality displayed by the Eskimos and the Russians is impossible in democratic Britain.

Unlike most of the adults, the Children, with the cold logic seen in other superchildren such as Odd John, are well aware that humanity has “a biological obligation” to kill them: “You cannot afford *not* to kill us, for if you don’t, you are finished.”³⁴ When the rational colonel tries to consider things from a “civilized standpoint,” he is told that “This is not a civilized matter . . . it is a very primitive matter. If we exist, we shall dominate you – that is clear and inevitable. Will you agree to be superseded, and start on the way to extinction without a struggle?”³⁵ Thus, the Children again show that violent competition is the only way

³¹ John Wyndham, *The Midwich Cuckoos*, p. 189.

³² Miles Link, “‘A Very Primitive Matter’”, p. 77.

³³ John Wyndham, *The Midwich Cuckoos*, p. 199.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

to deal with a competitive species, and civilized notion of compromise and tolerance are of no use. This all acts as an ironic reversal of the imperialist rhetoric of British colonizers. They took it upon themselves to bring ‘civilization’ to lands they considered primitive, but the Children, who are also colonizers, bring the ‘primitive’ into the heart of Britain.

In the end, Zellaby, who has long admitted the necessity of destroying the children, but been unable to break with his values of tolerance and peaceful compromise, blows them up in a suicide bombing. One of the reasons he was finally able to act was a worsening heart condition which would kill him soon anyway, but the real spur was the government’s decision that the Children “should be provided with the means of removing themselves.”³⁶ In other words, in *The Midwich Cuckoos* the government’s strategy is to enable a leavetaking. This strategy has already be seen in *Odd John*, where the *Homo superior* took themselves away to an isolated island. Just as their leavetaking failed once the world’s powers realised the threat they represented, so too does the Children’s in *The Midwich Cuckoos*. For Zellaby, enabling the Children to “shift the problem they represent to the territory of a people even more ill equipped to deal with it is a form of evasive procrastination which lacks any moral courage at all.”³⁷ Instead, he fulfils his “biological obligation” and wipes them out. Colin Greenland sees this act as an exercise of the human, and “characteristically British,” impulse of heroic self-sacrifice, with Zellaby “reasserting the endangered culture and so preserving it.”³⁸ For me, Zellaby’s act is actually a surrender to the logic of the Children. He preserves his culture, but only by abandoning its rules of tolerance and compromise.

As mentioned earlier, the adults’ reaction to the threat of another species is also complicated by the fact that they have taken the form of human looking children. Strangely,

³⁶ John Wyndham, *The Midwich Cuckoos*, p. 207.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 208.

³⁸ Colin Greenland, *The Entropy Exhibition: Michael Moorcock and the ‘New Wave’ in British Science Fiction* (Oxon: Routledge, 2012) p. 3.

given their status as “cuckoo children,” the Children’s “cuckoo phase” is the shortest, and least successful, of all the superchildren studied in this essay. While Odd John, the slan, and the children in *Childhood’s End*, and even Victor Stott, manage to pass as normal humans for a time, the nature of the Children’s conception, or rather, incubation, mark them out as different from the very start. The situation only gets worse when they are born. Although the only thing that distinguishes them psychically from normal human babies are their golden eyes (a common marker of difference already encountered in Victor Stott and Odd John), their behaviour confirms their otherness immediately. Bruhm notes how:

these counterfeit children have none of the innocence or neediness, none of the desires for love or parental affection that we regard as *de rigueur* for the young. They slip out from any recognisable diagnosis of childhood as a category other than that of a perfect futurity: they perform a precocity and self-possession that leaves them no room to be molded by adults.³⁹

This makes the Children akin to Clarke’s superchildren in *Childhood’s End*, whose independence from their parents is the first sign of their metamorphosis into a different species. The Children’s lack of innocence is made clear by Zellaby, who says, “there’s no tender sympathy with these, and they trail no clouds of glory, either.”⁴⁰ The ironic quoting of Wordsworth here holds the Children up against the Romantic ideal of childhood in order to show just how far they are from our conception of normative children.

The only childlike thing about the Children is that they appear to be “crueller in their actions than in their intentions.”⁴¹ Like the infant demi-god Anthony in *It’s A Good Life*,

³⁹ Steven Bruhm, “The Global Village of the Damned,” p. 159.

⁴⁰ John Wyndham, *The Midwich Cuckoos*, p. 114.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

which I'll look at later in chapter six, any sign of ill feeling towards the Children is punished with an extreme reaction. When a village youth accidentally knocks one of the Children down with his car, he is compelled by the other Children to drive headlong into a wall. One of the mothers defends the Children by saying "when you are young and frightened it is very easy to be more violent than you mean to be."⁴² Most of the adults agree with this reading of the Children's actions, seeing their severity as a sign of immaturity. However, when an adult asks one of them why they always overreact, the boy gives the coldly logical answer that "it makes more of an impression,"⁴³ showing, perhaps, that the Children are more mature than the adults give them credit for.

Furthermore, the Children "are confirmed as irredeemably alien and threatening" by their possession of what Zellaby calls "another little gimmick out of Pandora's infinite evolutionary box: the contesserate mind."⁴⁴ This also brings to mind Clarke's superchildren, but there's an important difference. Unlike the children in *Childhood's End*, who started out as individuals before merging together, the Children in *Midwich Cuckoos* have never been, and will never be, individuals. Instead, they are "two entities only – a boy, and a girl."⁴⁵ The Children's appearance reflects their composite nature, with them being "so similar that most of their ostensible mothers cannot tell them apart."⁴⁶ This again is reminiscent of *Childhood's End*, where the children's faces merge into "a common mold," and display no more emotion or feeling "than in the face of a snake or an insect."⁴⁷ Wymer has noted that Wyndham's novels "consistently characterise behaviour reminiscent of the social insects as sinister and

⁴² John Wyndham, *The Midwich Cuckoos*, p. 193.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

⁴⁴ Rowland Wymer, "How Safe is John Wyndham?" p. 34; John Wyndham, *The Midwich Cuckoos*, p. 176.

⁴⁵ John Wyndham, *The Midwich Cuckoos*, p. 122.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁴⁷ Arthur C. Clarke, *Childhood's End*, pp. 238-239.

essentially alien,” and *The Midwich Cuckoos* is no different.⁴⁸ Faced with a composite being possessing a keen intelligence and a penchant for extreme retaliation, it’s no wonder that the adults wish to destroy the Children. They display a cohesion impossible in human society, where Left wing battle Right wing, and division by race, class, and gender keep people forever apart.

Despite their obviously alien nature, the “cuckoo phase” is partially successful, at least with regards to the Children’s treatment by their mothers. Although only a very few of the women display genuine maternal feeling for the Children, lasting, in some cases right up until their deaths at the hands of Zellaby, almost all of the mothers accept the responsibility for their children in the early years. As one character says, “There is so much social and traditional pressure on women in these things. One’s self-defensive instinct is to conform to the approved pattern.”⁴⁹ Also, as Zellaby says, even though the mother know the children have been unnaturally conceived, “they did have the trouble and pain of bearing them – and that, even if they resent the imposition deeply, which some of them do, still isn’t the kind of link they can just snip and forget.”⁵⁰ The same is not true for the men in the village, however. When the Children cause another man to commit suicide with a gun he was aiming at them, the men march on the Children’s school to kill them all. “It’s the kind of excuse the men have always wanted,” Zellaby says.⁵¹ Here we have an alien invasion as a family drama, with the children of an unknown father being threatened by their unwitting step fathers. This section also shows the innate violence of humanity, and the existence of ‘primitive’ emotions inside all of us.

⁴⁸ Rowland Wymer, “How Safe is John Wyndham?” p. 34.

⁴⁹ John Wyndham, *The Midwich Cuckoos*, p. 112.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 156.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 155.

After thoroughly convincing us of the Children's otherness, and distance from the category of normative childhood, Wyndham lets us see a different side to them in the closing pages. Throughout the novel, the Children have only ever appeared in small groups or as individuals, and have remained the impassive invaders the adults have made them out to be, but in the final scene we see them en masse, and discover that they really *are* children after all. Zellaby is able to get a bomb past the Children by "playing on their most banal juvenile characteristics," and offering to show them a movie and bringing a jar of sweets.⁵² "They're very fond of those," he says of the ironically named bullseyes sweets, "After all, they are still children – with a small 'c' – too."⁵³ The narrator sees the grinning children flocking to help Zellaby with his projection gear and is taken aback by how childlike they are. "It was impossible to associate the Children, as I saw them now, with danger. I had a confused feeling that these could not be *the* Children, at all; that the theories, fears, and threats we had discussed must have to do with some other group of Children."⁵⁴

That this sudden recognition of the Children's immaturity comes only a page before they are all blown up makes the ending fraught with ambiguity. It raises the spectre of doubt about what we've seen so far, and the suspicion that we've been misled by Zellaby's constant references to the Children as an evolutionary threat. The ambiguity is momentary, however, for we remember the Children's own proclamation that is our "biological obligation" to destroy them. In the final lines, we are reminded again of the Darwinian message espoused by Wyndham through Zellaby: "we have lived so long in a garden that we have all but forgotten the commonplace of survival . . . If you want to keep alive in the jungle, you must live as the jungle does..."⁵⁵ Some sixty years earlier, Huxley used the same imagery,

⁵² Steven Bruhm, "The Global Village of the Damned," p. 169.

⁵³ John Wyndham, *The Midwich Cuckoos*, p. 213.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 220.

“invoking the topos of a cultivated garden that stands in stark contrast to the wild and untamed jungle from which it has been carved.”⁵⁶ Huxley’s point was that “no matter how well-cultivated the garden is, the threat of nature to overwhelm it remains.”⁵⁷ *The Midwich Cuckoos* is a reminder of this. The novel is not so much an attack on our “civilized values” themselves, but on the complacent belief that we have escaped the rules of Nature by following them. It’s a wake-up call to a people who have prematurely congratulated themselves on burying their ‘primitive’ emotions beneath a well-manicured lawn called ‘civilization,’ and a reminder that the fight for survival is at the heart of existence.

⁵⁶ Anne-Barbara Graff, 'Administrative Nihilism,' p. 37.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

Chapter 5

The Chrysalids

Written two years before *The Midwich Cuckoos*, *The Chrysalids* stands as almost a mirror image of the later novel. In *The Chrysalids*, it is society that is ‘primitive’ and the superchildren who are ‘civilised,’ and as such it is the children who must learn that life is a Darwinian struggle for survival rather than the adults. Also, our sympathy is almost wholly with the children in *The Chrysalids*, and the question of species survival is settled in favour of the superseding species in the end, with the unevolved adults being the ones who are destroyed. For all this, Wyndham’s target is still the same, namely, the complacent notion of mastery over nature.

The Chrysalids is set in a post-apocalyptic farming community called Waknuk. The continuing fallout from a nuclear war ensures mutation rates are high, but the community fiercely police what they call “Deviations.” For the people of Waknuk, any difference from the norm is “a blasphemy against the true image of God, and hateful in the sight of God.”¹ The community’s ‘primitive’ value of intolerance is matched by their uncompromising and violent response to “Deviations.” Babies born with any kind of physical flaw are instantly banished to live in the Fringes, a wild, untamed land away from the settlements, and the life of the farmers are marked by the regular slaughtering of “the two-headed calf, four-legged chicken, or whatever other kind of Offence it happened to be.”²

In 1967, Damon Knight described the community in *The Chrysalids* as “one of the most believable After-the-Atom societies on record,” and that arguably still holds true today.³

¹ John Wyndham, *The Chrysalids*, p. 10.

² Ibid., p. 15.

³ Damon Knight, *In Search of Wonder*, p. 252.

The credibility of the rural society, devoutly religious, and devoid of technology, “is sustained by our memories of other frontier societies,” particularly the “atmosphere of New England Puritanism” which pervades Wyndham’s description of the town of Waknuk.⁴ In Waknuk, the women all wear crosses stitched to their dresses, and the only decoration to be found in people’s houses are wooden panels with religious sayings burnt in to them.

In the house of David, the young protagonist, the largest of these wooden panels bears a reminder to “WATCH THOU FOR THE MUTANT!”⁵ Unlike his parents, however, David isn’t sure that Deviations are such a serious matter. In the opening chapter he befriends a girl with six toes, and wonders “Surely having one very small toe extra . . . surely that couldn’t be enough to make her ‘hateful in the sight of God...’?”⁶ He ends by concluding that the “ways of the world were very puzzling.”⁷ Here Wyndham sets David up as the holder of ‘civilized’ values, that is, tolerant and willing to find compromise, as well as capturing the confused innocence of youth. As David grows older and becomes aware of the telepathic powers that mark him out as different, he comes to realise that compromise is impossible. Although he doesn’t fully accept his parents’ ‘primitive’ values, he has lost his innocence, and will never be as civilized again. This “development as fall” narrative forms the backbone of *The Chrysalids*, and David’s first-person narration not only allows a level of identification with the superchildren that goes beyond any of the novels covered so far, but also leads to interesting differences in interpretation, which I will detail later on.

As with *The Midwich Cuckoos*, Wyndham reflected the society around him in *The Chrysalids*. Harrison notes the emergence in the ‘50s of a new social class comprised of scholarship kids, who were better educated and had higher expectations than their working

⁴ Rowland Wymer, “How Safe is John Wyndham?” p. 29.

⁵ John Wyndham, *The Chrysalids*, p. 14.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

and lower-middle class parents. “The Generation Gap – which would widen within ten years into outright rebellion – was opening up. If the educated young were beginning to feel like strangers in their own homes, their elders were beginning to see them as dangerous, out of control: deviant.”⁸ Adults’ intolerance of their children’s differences is writ large in *The Chrysalids*, but Wyndham also allows us an insight into the children’s frustration: “It called for a lot of restraint to remain silent in the face of simple errors, to listen patiently to silly arguments based on misconceptions, to do a job in the customary way when one knew there was a better way. . .”⁹ One can imagine that any scholarship kid reading those words in the ‘50s would have recognised the sentiment immediately.

The influence of Wyndham’s apprenticeship in the American pulps is much more evident in *The Chrysalids* than in *The Midwich Cuckoos*. Stableford states that Wyndham is the “most striking example of a writer who contrived to combine the traditions of British scientific romance and American science fiction,” and *The Chrysalids* is perhaps the novel that best reflects this.¹⁰ Post-apocalyptic settings were common in science fiction from the genre’s inception, but they were especially popular in the wake of Hiroshima, when the idea of world-wide annihilation became less a fantasy and more of a realistic threat.¹¹ *The Chrysalids* stands alongside Lewis Padgett’s *Mutant*, which I will look at later, as one of many science fiction stories of the ‘50s to be set after a nuclear holocaust. Pulp fiction of the era also “abounded with stories about groups of noble superhumans . . . misunderstood and unjustly persecuted by their stupid, envious cousins,” a description which is the perfect fit for Wyndham’s novel, where the superhuman children are branded deviations of the worst kind

⁸ M. John Harrison, “Introduction”, *The Chrysalids* (London: Penguin, 2010) p. ix.

⁹ John Wyndham, *The Chrysalids*, p. 80.

¹⁰ Brian Stableford, *Scientific Romances in Britain 1890-1950*, p. 326.

¹¹ Peter Nicholls, John Clute and David Langford, “Post-Holocaust”, *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, eds. John Clute, David Langford, Peter Nicholls and Graham Sleight. (London: Gollancz, 31 Aug 2018) <<http://www.sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/post-holocaust>>. [accessed 25 July 2019]

by the intolerant majority.¹² Such “mutational romances” were “a staple of pulp magazines, comics and sf cinema, with the irradiation of various creatures frequently producing giant monsters and the irradiation of people causing metamorphoses into supermen.”¹³ The telepathic Baldies created by “The Blow-up” in *Mutant*, as well as the other irradiated supermen found in the pulps, are therefore direct literary predecessors of the telepathic children in *The Chrysalids* created by “The Tribulation.”

The Chrysalids also shares many themes with the other superchild texts I have looked at so far. Yet again we have a characters who adhere to the *younger=more powerful* equation. In this case it is David’s younger sister, Petra, who is the most powerful telepath, able to broadcast her thoughts half-way around the world, while her older companions have trouble broadcasting more than a few miles. The telepaths also go through a “cuckoo phase,” and are quick to realise that they must keep their “true selves hidden; to walk, talk, and live indistinguishably from other people.”¹⁴ They are aided in this mission by the fact that there’s no external sign of their internal difference, which stands in contrast to almost every other superchild looked at in this essay, whose appearance, especially their eyes, usually gives them away. This makes the “cuckoo phase” in *The Chrysalids* the most successful, but also makes the people’s displeasure with them that much greater when they are finally discovered: “what’s got them so agitated about us is that nothing show. We’ve been living among them for nearly twenty years and they didn’t suspect it.”¹⁵

The major themes Wyndham drew from the scientific romance tradition are the ones I have already detailed in the chapter concerning *The Midwich Cuckoos* – first, that life is a Darwinian struggle for survival – second, that Nature will not be denied, and complacently

¹² Brian M. Stableford, “Superman”, *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*.

¹³ Brian M Stableford and David Langford, “Mutants”, *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*.

¹⁴ John Wyndham, *The Chrysalids*, p. 85.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 132.

thinking otherwise is foolish. Both of these themes are made explicit at the end by a woman from “Sealand,” who arrives at the end to save the children from the people of Waknuk, who have discovered their telepathic abilities and are now hunting them across the country. The Sealand woman is “one of those figures like Gordon Zellaby. . . who is imbued with special authority,” and her set –piece speeches extrapolate yet again Wyndham’s “bleakly Darwinian view of life as a ceaseless and ruthless struggle for existence waged between competing species.”¹⁶ Having killed the people of Waknuk who were hunting for the children, as well as other mutants who live in the Fringes, the Sealand woman sums up the situation for the children, saying “In loyalty to their kind they cannot tolerate our rise; in loyalty to our kind, we cannot tolerate their obstruction.”¹⁷ This, clearly, is another iteration of the “biological obligation” that the Children in *The Midwich Cuckoos* talked of. A competitive community is a threat, and must be destroyed, however unpleasant we find it. The adults in Waknuk have long recognised this, as one “venomously puritanical man” makes clear: “Is a tiger-cat responsible for being a tiger-cat? But you kill it. You can’t afford to have it around loose.”¹⁸

For all their recognition of the realities of competition and survival, the people of Waknuk were complacent enough to think they could control Nature, and for the Sealand woman, this was their real crime:

The essential quality of life is living; the essential quality of living is change; change is evolution: and we are part of it. The static, the enemy of change, is the enemy of life, and therefore our implacable enemy.¹⁹

¹⁶ Rowland Wymer “How Safe is John Wyndham?” pp .31 and 26.

¹⁷ John Wyndham, *The Chrysalids*, p. 199.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.88.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

In passages that again echo Huxley's imagery of a garden threatening to be overrun by a jungle, Wyndham tells us how the people of Waknuk sought to stabilise the land, weeding out all deviation and changes in the structure of plants while the wild Fringes lay threateningly around them. The people of Waknuk yearned for a stability, and this was their downfall. As the Sealand woman says: "soon they will attain the stability they strive for, in the only form it is granted – a place among the fossils..."²⁰ In the face of the Nature, and the constant change it requires, any stability achieved is merely an illusion.

Writing on the SF Review site, Thomas M. Wagner says that "Wyndham stumbles — catastrophically — at the climax, in a way that actually undermines the story's thematic foundations."²¹ For him, the novel's main theme is the danger of oppression and intolerance, a theme already explored in *The Hampdenshire Wonder*, and which can be seen in several of the American pulp works I will look at in chapter six. The sudden reversal of fortunes, where the children gain the upper hand and the Sealand woman kills all of the non-telepaths, makes the telepaths no better than the people who had oppressed them in Wagner's eyes. This apparent U-turn hints "darkly at the familiar political experience of revolutions turning full circle and replicating the tyrannies the sought to overthrow."²² The Sealand woman sees the Old People, and by extension the current people of Waknuk who idolise them, as "ingenious half-humans, little better than savages," and "near sublime animals, but not more."²³ These words remind us of the rhetoric already explored in *The Midwich Cuckoos* about the distinction between primitive/savage and civilized. They are also reminiscent of Odd John, who considered *Homo sapiens* "more than beast and less than fully human."²⁴ More

²⁰ John Wyndham, *The Chrysalids*, p. 184.

²¹ Thomas M. Wagner, "Review of *The Chrysalids*", *SF Reviews* (2004) <<http://www.sfreviews.net/chrysalids.html>> [accessed 15 July 2019.]

²² Rowland Wymer, "How Safe is John Wyndham?" p. 33.

²³ John Wyndham, *The Chrysalids*, p. 158-159.

²⁴ Olaf Stapledon, *Odd John*, p. 81.

disturbingly, they also echo the justifications for genocide handed out by any number of leaders in the twentieth century, where human beings became “untermench.”

Despite the unsettling nature of the Sealand woman’s speeches, I would argue that there are two mitigating factors that keeps the ending from being a “catastrophic” stumble on Wyndham’s part. Firstly, the unease we may feel when faced with the Sealand woman’s attitude is allayed somewhat when David says he “did not have the power of detachment that could allow me to think of myself as another species – nor am I sure that I have it yet.”²⁵ In this way, Wyndham allows readers who have identified with David to keep some level of sympathy with him, showing that he hasn’t fully abandoned his ‘civilized,’ liberal notions of compromise and tolerance, nor succumbed entirely to the Sealand woman’s extreme way of thinking. Likewise, his younger sister, Petra, is described as being “pretty much bored with all this apologia.”²⁶ For all her superiority as a telepath, Petra is still recognisably a child, with a child’s distaste for the education speechifying of adults. Here we have a fleeting glimpse of innocence, rarely seen in superchild texts, which suggests a way out of the bloody business of survival. If Petra is able to maintain her innocence, the texts suggests, then perhaps the future won’t be as violent and competitive as the past.

Secondly, the ending is not as abrupt as Wagner makes out. In fact, close attention shows that “this extreme conclusion has been carefully prepared for by means of gradual changes in the moral and political outlook of the young telepaths.”²⁷ Roughly halfway through the novel, when one of them plans to marry a “norm,” the children reveal these changes in their outlook. “Other people seem so dim, so half-perceived, compared with those whom know through their thought shapes,” David says.²⁸ It’s a mild rebuke, in keeping with

²⁵ John Wyndham, *The Chrysalids*, p. 200.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

²⁷ Rowland Wymer, “How Safe is John Wyndham?” p. 31.

²⁸ John Wyndham, *The Chrysalids*, p. 93.

his tolerant nature, but it does show a growing sense of his own superiority. Another of the children goes further, saying that marrying a “norm” would be like “tying yourself for life to a cripple,” a highly pejorative turn of phrase that show his growing contempt for non-telepaths.²⁹ A few pages later, another of the children says that “this is a war, between our kind and theirs. We didn’t start it – we’ve just as much right to exist as they have.”³⁰ It’s plain, then, that some of the children had already grasped that they were in an interspecies war for survival before the Sealand woman came and told them. Although they might not be as extreme as her in their willingness to kill, they are already on the path to violence.

What this boils down to, then, is the contrast between two different readings of the novel. The first emphasises the way the novel uses “our empathy with the persecuted to foster a worthily liberal dislike of intolerance towards minorities,” and such a reading understandably finds the Sealand woman’s speeches out of tune with the rest of the novel.³¹ The second emphasises the competitive, and essentially amoral, character of the fight for survival between species, which is subtly presented throughout the book, before being made explicit at the end. It’s in the interplay between these two readings that we find the heart of the novel, and the Wyndham’s use of the first-person voice is critical in keeping them both in the frame.

In *The Midwich Cuckoos*, the narrator’s own feelings are largely absent, and instead we rely on Zellaby’s frequent set-piece speeches to help us make sense of the plot. Zellaby consistently expounds Wyndham’s Darwinian message, and finally abandons his ‘civilized’ values in capitulation to it. With the exception of the momentary flash I have mentioned at the end, *The Midwich Cuckoos* does not leave much room for ambiguity. *The Chrysalids* operates differently. The Sealand woman’s set-piece speeches may recall Zellaby’s, but they

²⁹ John Wyndham, *The Chrysalids*, p. 91.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 128.

³¹ Rowland Wymer, “How Safe is John Wyndham?” p. 29.

occupy far fewer pages, only occurring at the very end. David, the main character, whose eyes we see the entire novel through, not only represents ‘civilized’ values, but also, as I have shown, never completely relinquishes them in the manner of Zellaby. While some of the other superchildren completely commit to the idea of an inter-species war, David does not, and is mainly concerned with looking after his little sister. Because of David’s ambiguous feeling about the Sealand woman’s speeches, and because of what we might call the last traces of his youthful innocence, a liberal, rather than confrontationally Darwinian, reading of the book is still possible.

That these two different readings are simultaneously possible can be seen in the long after life of *The Chrysalids*. Writing in 1992, Wymer tells us that “forty years after its first publication, *The Chrysalids* remains extremely popular in British schools,” and that “anecdotal evidence suggests that it is the liberal reading of *The Chrysalids* which prevails in British classrooms and which makes it seem suitable for discussion in the first place.”³² This is backed up by Clark, who says that *The Chrysalids* “is curiously popular among English teachers who imagine, weirdly, that it is a plea for racial tolerance.”³³ The appeal of *The Chrysalids* to teachers is obvious. For one, it has a young, first-person narrator, which encourages identification among teenage readers. Secondly, it can be linked to other common set texts, such as *The Crucible* (1953), in discussions about religious intolerance.

The other reading, which privileges the competitive aspects of the text, is also evident in the years following its publication. When the generation gap did finally blossom into “outright rebellion” in the 1960s, *The Chrysalids* was enrolled into the ranks of the militant young by Jefferson Airplane, one of the defining psychedelic rock acts of the hippy era. In the title track from *Crown of Creation* (1968), the band quote extensively from the Sealand

³² Rowland Wymer, “How Safe is John Wyndham?” pp. 28 and 30.

³³ Stephen R.L. Clark, *How to Live Forever, Science Fiction and Philosophy*, p. 154.

woman's speeches, displaying "an unremitting hostility towards an unspecified 'you' who presumably represents the older generation, the American political establishment, and perhaps the whole of Western democracy."³⁴ It's easy to see the appeal of *The Chrysalids* to Jefferson Airplane and the '60s generation. Just as David and the other telepaths were struggling to escape from their parent's oppressive culture, so too were the young of the '60s attempting a "cultural disconnection equivalent to an evolutionary mutation."³⁵ Furthermore, it was their minds that held the power for such a break. David's uncle, Axel, an ex-sailor who's more tolerant than most of the Waknuk citizenry, tells David that early man was physically "as good as he needed to be" so his mind was "the only thing he could usefully develop; it's the only way open to him – to develop new qualities of mind."³⁶ Under the influence of LSD, the youth culture of the '60s were bent on developing these new qualities of the mind, starting a "revolution in the head, along the highways of perception and understanding."³⁷ With *The Chrysalids*, Wyndham provided a potent metaphors for the mental and cultural transformation of the young, also providing a radical us vs them, stance for later generations to adopt.

To conclude my discussion of Wyndham, I would like to look briefly at his status as a writer. In the 1950s, he was "probably more read than any other sf author," and his most famous works, such as *The Day of the Triffids* and *The Midwich Cuckoos*, have had an enduring appeal among readers up to the present day, having never been out of print.³⁸ However, for a long time, he was neglected critically. Brian Aldiss's oft-quoted comments in *The Billion Year Spree* (1973) about Wyndham being a writer of "cosy catastrophes" have served as a short hand for ways of thinking about his work, an attitude summed up by Wymer

³⁴ Rowland Wymer "How Safe is John Wyndham?" p. 30.

³⁵ Colin Greenland, *The Entropy Exhibition*, p. 2.

³⁶ John Wyndham, *The Chrysalids*, p. 78.

³⁷ Colin Greenland, *The Entropy Exhibition*, p. 6.

³⁸ John Clute, "Wyndham, John", *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*.

as “his books are ‘safe’, ‘comfortable’ , and ‘generally free of controversy.’”³⁹ In recent years, however, with articles like Wymer’s, and the prodigious efforts of research by David Ketterer, Wyndham’s reputation has to a large extent been rehabilitated. Therefore I have not made this subject a large part of my discussion. Although some erroneous characterisations of Wyndham as an unthreatening apologist for middle-class values still persist, there is a growing critical consensus that the moral complexity of his work makes it “eminently suitable for discussion, whether in classrooms or elsewhere, but it certainly does not make it safe.”⁴⁰ I only hope my own work in this section has proved a similar point.

³⁹ Rowland Wymer, “How Safe is John Wyndham?” p. 26.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

Chapter 6.

The Superchild in American Pulp Fiction

It will be remembered from the introduction that Stableford argued that British speculative fiction developed “quite separately from the American tradition of science fiction,” and the emphasis on evolutionary themes, and ambivalence towards science in British scientific romance are signifiers of this separate development.¹ In this chapter I will assess the truth of this statement, and see how American portrayed their superchildren.

In the 1940s and 1950s, American pulp science fiction magazines “abounded with stories about groups of noble superhumans,” some of which used the superchild motif.² This was relatively new territory for the pulps. The early magazines of the 1930s were generally more concerned with swashbuckling space operas in the Buck Rogers mould than with *homo superior*. These early pulps were “a sort of animated catalogue of gadgets,” with inventive writers providing their lantern-jawed heroes with ever more fanciful gizmos to help them beat the villains.³ What, then, occasioned the rise of the superman theme in the 1940s and 1950s? I argue that the glut of such stories can largely be attributed to John W. Campbell, who not only popularized the theme, but also had a large impact on the shaping its parameters.

Often writing under the pen name Don A. Stuart, John Campbell had been one of the most popular writers of the earlier pulp era. His real influence upon the genre, however, began when he took over as editor of *Astounding Stories*. Berger tells us that: “Although previous editors had experimented with serious themes, Campbell’s regime at *Astounding*

¹ Brian Stableford, *Scientific Romances in Britain 1890-1950*, p. 3.

² Brian M. Stableford, “Superman.” *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*.

³ Frederick Pohl, “The Day After Tomorrow”, *Galaxy*, Vol.24, No.1 (1965) https://archive.org/stream/Galaxy_v24n01_1965-10#page/n3/mode/2up [accessed 10 June 2019] p. 4.

was the first to encourage intelligent, logically consistent speculation upon the social implications of technical progress.”⁴ Campbell attracted a dazzling roster of talent to work with him, with genre stalwarts such as Asimov, Heinlein, Sturgeon and van Vogt all getting their start in *Astounding* during Campbell’s stewardship. Campbell was known as a hands-on editor, and Lester Del Ray believes that while “some of the writers might have begun without Campbell . . . their work would have been different without him.”⁵ He exerted a considerable influence over the writers who would come to form his stable, and it’s possible to see his fingerprints on much of the work published in *Astounding* during his tenure.

This especially true with regards to the theme of mutated superman. Attebery says that “Campbell not only requested innumerable versions of “Homo Superior” but even asked for particular arrangements . . . In letters to contributors, Campbell repeatedly suggested the theme of the mutated superman, often with psionic abilities.”⁶ Campbell had been interested in psionics since his time as a student at Duke University, where he’d volunteered for J.B Rhine’s early experiments in ESP. These experiments “gave credence to the idea that there might be supermen already among us, not yet aware of their latent powers,” and also “provided a new archetype for the superhuman, outwardly normal but possessed of one or more Psi Powers.”⁷ Campbell was fascinated by this idea, and used his influence as editor to make sure his pet obsession was taken up by any number of the writers in his stable. Although psychic powers have appeared in literature since the Victorian times (including in *Odd John*), the iteration of the theme seen in the superman boom of the 1940s and 1950s can be directly attributed to Campbell’s interest in the subject and his influence as editor.

⁴ Albert Berger, “The Magic That Works: John W. Campbell and the American Response to Technology”, *Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. V, No. 4 (Spring 1972) <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0022-3840.1972.0504_867.x> [accessed 15 June 2019] p. 881.

⁵ Lester Del Ray, *The World of Science Fiction*, p. 149.

⁶ Brian Attebery, “Super Men”, *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (March 1998) <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4240674>> [accessed: March 19 2018] p. 62.

⁷ Brian Stableford, “Superman”, *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*.

The same is true for the nature of the superman. The few supermen who appeared in the pulps before Campbell were generally treated as villains, but Campbell's version of the superman was essentially optimistic. For him, "mutation was the tool which a highly sentient, purposeful and anthropomorphic Nature used to improve the human race," and his mutants would be "the contented and successful leaders of society."⁸ In an essay published in *Astounding* in 1941, Campbell imagined someone with all of the favourable mutations nature has devised. "The mutant-accumulation-man would, in all probability, fit himself smoothly . . . into business as a top-rank executive."⁹ For Campbell, this was only reasonable. After all, if the supermen were the most intelligent and best adapted beings on Earth, "Where would you expect to find them if not running things on the planet?"¹⁰

It should be noted that Campbell's views on human hierarchy were often problematic and marred by racism. In her acceptance speech at this year's Hugo Awards, Jeannette Ng called Campbell a "fascist," and blamed his editorial influence for setting the template of science fiction as: "Male. White. Exalting in the ambitions of imperialists and colonisers, settlers and industrialists."¹¹ This is reflected in my chosen texts, where the majority of the protagonists are white males.

Such were the parameters for Campbell's supermen – male, white, possessing psi powers, and born to rule. For an example of this model being used by one of Campbell's writers, we need look no further than the first major superman work published during Campbell's stewardship of *Astounding*, A.E van Vogt's *Slan* (1940). In a letter to Clifford

⁸ Albert Berger, "The Magic That Works", p. 919.

⁹ John W. Campbell Jr., "We're Not All Human!" *Astounding*, Vol. 28 No.1 (Sept 1941) <https://archive.org/details/Astounding_v28n01_1941-09_SLiV/page/n119> [accessed 12 April 2019] p. 127.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 127.

¹¹ Jeanette Ng, "Acceptance speech for the John W Campbell Best New Writer Award," *Medium*, <<https://medium.com/@nettlefish/john-w-campbell-for-whom-this-award-was-named-was-a-fascist-f693323d3293>> [accessed 02 September 2019]

Simak in 1953, Campbell says that van Vogt wrote *Slan* for him in response to a comment about giving a superman character credibility by introducing him as a child, when his powers are not fully developed.¹² Even if we choose not to believe Campbell, the supermen in *Slan* follow Campbell's model so closely that his influence is clear.

The hero of the novel, Jommy Cross, belongs to the telepathic race of mutants, automatically ticking Campbell's box for "psionic abilities." As per Campbell's suggestions, when we first meet the young Jommy Cross, his powers are still undeveloped. Van Vogt tells us it "was terrible to be little and helpless and young and unexperienced, when their life demanded the strength of maturity; the alertness of slan adulthood."¹³ Jommy's position is precarious, as like so many of the superchildren, the slan are "misunderstood and unjustly persecuted by their stupid, envious cousins."¹⁴

The early parts of the book, then, where Jommy lays low and waits for his powers to develop, can be seen as another example of the superchild in its "cuckoo phase" as defined by Miller. Part of this cuckoo phase involves Jommy wearing a wig, because, just as the eyes of the superchildren in *The Hampdenshire Wonder* and *Odd John* acted as outward signs of their internal superiority, the slan are recognisable from the tendrils on the top of their heads. Van Vogt tells us that the tendrils are "growths from formerly little-known formations at the top of the brain, which, obviously, must have been the source of all the vague mental telepathy known to earlier human beings and still practised by people everywhere."¹⁵ This casual mentioning of "vague mental telepathy" is perhaps a call back to Rhine's experiments in ESP.

¹² John Campbell, quoted in Brian Attebery, "Super Men", p. 63.

¹³ A.E. van Vogt, *Slan*, p. 6.

¹⁴ Brian Stableford, "Superman", *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*.

¹⁵ A.E. van Vogt, *Slan*, p. 68.

It's in the ending of *Slan* where van Vogt cleaves closest to Campbellian ideas of what a superman should be. Having undergone many trials and adventures, Jommy Cross finally confronts the prime antagonist of the book, Kier Gray, the "absolute dictator of the planet," and discovers that he too is a slan.¹⁶ Kier Gray explains the situation to Jommy using the same logic as Campbell: "What more natural than that we should insinuate our way into control of the human government? Are we not the most intelligent beings on the face of the earth?"¹⁷ Damon Knight has noted that the plot "wherein the leaders of two opposing parties turn out to be identical" was used more than once by van Vogt, though he adds that it "appears not only in van Vogt's work but in that of several other *Astounding* writers; and I suspect that the final responsibility for it rests with Campbell."¹⁸ Whatever the case, there's no doubt that Campbell approved of the slan Keir Gray's mastery of the world, specifically mentioning the "inevitable logic" of it in his 1941 essay.¹⁹

The importance of fathers, and the corresponding lack of maternal influences, are striking features of *Slan*. Jommy's mother is mobbed and executed offstage within the first few pages, and though Jommy mourns her for a few chapters, his story really begins when he's old enough to "take possession of his father's secret," which includes a distinctly phallic metal rod that can spew "virulent fire," and a stack of papers containing his father's scientific work.²⁰ Van Vogt tells us that Jommy is "his father's son, heir to the products of his father's genius," and a few lines later Jommy tells Kathleen that "there is none more important than the son of Peter Cross."²¹ It's his father's knowledge, too, that opens the way for him in his final confrontation. When Keir Gray realises that Jommy is his father's son and possess the

¹⁶ A.E. van Vogt, *Slan*, p.5

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 150.

¹⁸ Damon Knight, *In Search of Wonder* p. 60.

¹⁹ John W. Campbell, Jr., "We're Not All Human!" p. 127.

²⁰ A.E. van Vogt, *Slan*, pp. 48 and 53.

²¹ Ibid, p. 93.

secret for atomic energy, he says “John Thomas Cross, I welcome you and your father’s discovery,” signalling his new status by calling him by his full name.²² Attebery has also noted how the “slans trace their ancestry from Lann – not even the biological father of the first slans but merely their discoverer – rather than from the nameless mother who bore them.”²³ The primacy of fathers is highlighted one last time by van Vogt’s presentation of the young female slan, Katherine. There are no mentions of Katherine’s mother at all in the book, but the revelation that Kier Gray is her father constitutes the final sentence of the novel, suggesting that it’s the paternal line, whether biologically or merely socially, that really counts in *Slan*.

Attebery notes that introducing Jommy Cross as a child with undeveloped powers “not only solves the credibility problem identified by Campbell, but also allows Jommy to function as the hero of a fairy tale, alone and abused at first, triumphant at the last,” a clear echo of the Jungian paradox I discussed in the introduction.²⁴ Jommy’s triumph takes the form of “a set of fairy tale gifts,” including his entry into the ruling class and the hand of Keir Gray’s daughter, Kathleen.²⁵ Heightening the fairy-tale feeling of the book is the form of government van Vogt chooses for the world he depicts; Keir Gray is far more like a tyrant king than a dictator. Damon Knight has noted the “regiphile trend” in much of van Vogt’s work: “It strikes me as singular that in van Vogt’s stories, nearly all of which deal with the future, the form of government which occurs most often is the absolute monarchy.”²⁶ It’s this comingling of fairy tale elements, such as all powerful kings and rags-to-riches adolescent heroes, with science fiction conventions like space-ships and ray guns that the peculiar flavour of van Vogt’s writing lies. Van Vogt certainly displays none of the ambivalence

²² A.E. van Vogt, *Slan*, p. 151.

²³ Brian Attebery, “Super Men”, p. 66.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

²⁶ Damon Knight, *In Search of Wonder*, p. 58.

towards science British writers often did, lovingly detailing a wide array of gadgets and spaceships throughout the novel. Berger sees van Vogt as “a link to the older tradition of bug-eyed monsters and galactic empires.”²⁷ Scholes and Rabkin agree, describing him as a “writer of the Doc Smith sort, who tried to adapt to the new themes and concerns of the forties and after.”²⁸ These themes and concerns may have come from Campbell, but the pulpy flavour of van Vogt’s writing is all his own.

Slan was a success for van Vogt and Campbell, with fans taking the character of Jommy Cross to their hearts. Pilsch argues that fans identified with the slans because “In addition to being more intelligent, fans . . . felt persecuted and isolated due to their intellectual abilities and interests.”²⁹ The phrase “fans are slans,” which originated in fanzines and newsletters soon after the novel was published, shows how far this identification went. Attebery tells us that Campbell too “believed he shared more than a set of initials with Jommy Cross.”³⁰ In common with the fans reading his magazine, Campbell felt he was intellectually superior to people who didn’t read science fiction (as well as people of other races, as mentioned above), the root cause, perhaps, of his fascination with intellectually superior mutants.

Before moving on to the other novels in this section, I’d like to pause briefly to discuss the format they originally appeared in. *Slan* is a good example of how a piece of science fiction might evolve in the Campbell era, starting life as a four part serial in *Astounding* before later being turned into a novel. This practise of developing short stories

²⁷ Albert Berger, “The Magic That Works”, p. 898

²⁸ Robert Scholes and Eric Rabkin, *Science Fiction: History, Science, Vision* (London: Oxford University Press, 1977) p. 52.

²⁹ Andrew Pilsch, “Self-Help Supermen: The Politics of Fan Utopias in World War II-Era Science Fiction”, *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol.41, No.3 (November 2014) <<https://www.jsotr.or/stable/10.5621/sciefictstud.41.3.0524>> [accessed 10 March 2019] p. 530.

³⁰ Brian Attebery, “Super Men”, p. 66.

into novels, which van Vogt termed “fix ups,” was par for the course amongst American science fiction writers of the 1940s and 1950s. All of the novels in this section began life in the pulps, whether as standalone stories which were added to later, or as a serial. As Rabkin has pointed out, “instalment publication was the only American outlet for original science fiction novels” until the 1950s paperback boom.³¹ This stands in stark contrast to Britain, where the market for science fiction was “predominantly in book form” and “there were few magazine markets for the sf short story.”³² While Stableford’s observations about scientific romances in Britain help explain the difference in themes between the two traditions, I argue that the difference in publishing practises goes a long way to explaining the different writing styles of British and American science fiction. While British authors had the space to develop their ideas over the course of a novel, American writers had to create self-contained scenes that were exciting enough to be published as individual stories before combining them later into book form.

Mutant (1953), written by the husband and wife team of Kuttner and Moore under the pseudonym Lewis Padgett, is another example of one of these “fix-ups.” The chapters in the novel were all originally published as short stories in *Astounding*, with the first one, “The Piper’s Son,” appearing in 1945. The story introduced readers to the Baldies, a race of hairless, telepathic mutants who were the product of fallout from an atomic war. As I have mentioned, they are clear antecedents of Wyndham’s children in *The Crysallids*. On first glance, the Baldies, with their superior intellect and psionic abilities, seem like the typical products of Campbell’s editorial influence; there’s even a passing reference in the text to the

³¹ E. S. Rabkin, “The composite novel in science fiction”, *Foundation*, Vol 0 (1996) <<https://search.proquest.com/docview/1312076146?accountid=8630>> [accessed 17 July 2019] p. 94,

³² Farah Mendlesohn, “Fiction, 1926-1949 (Part I: History)”, *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*, ed. Mark Bould, Andrew Butler, Adam Roberts, Sherryl Vint (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009) < <https://search.proquest.com/docview/2137944274?accountid=8630> > [accessed 20 March 2019]

“Duke-Rhine” experiments.³³ Closer inspection, however, shows that the Baldies represent the antithesis of Campbell’s idea that the mutants are born to rule.

The majority of the Baldies in *Mutant* do everything in their power to avoid antagonising the already hostile humans they live amongst, hoping that one day they will be fully accepted into society. The protagonist of the first story/chapter, Burkhalter, is a typical adult Baldy; he wears a wig and works in a middling job in order to avoid trouble with the unmutated humans. He tells one character that he’s learned to be inconspicuous: “That’s why I’m not a wealthy man, or in politics. We’re really buying safety for our species by forgoing certain individual advantages.”³⁴ Here we have the “cuckoo phase” as permanent survival strategy. As one character in a later story says: “In the jungle, a monkey with a red flannel coat would be torn to pieces by its undressed colleague.”³⁵

There’s another group of Baldies, however, who see themselves as inherently superior to humans and don’t want to hide who they are. In many of the other superhuman stories of the Campbell era, this group would be the heroes in waiting, but in *Mutant* they are repeatedly called “paranoid,” and they constitute the main antagonists of the novel. One of the “paranoids” complains that the status quo “isn’t logical. It isn’t just or natural. When a new race appears, it’s destined to rule.”³⁶ This is the perfect expression of the Campbellian idea of what a superman should be, but far from being the battle cry of a hero, it is described in *Mutant* as the ramblings of “maladjusted egotists, the ones for who a long time had refused to wear wigs, and who had bragged of their superiority.”³⁷ Kuttner and Moore therefore seem to be saying that a spirit of sympathetic cooperation holds the key to the survival of a new

³³ Lewis Padgett, *Mutant* (London: Mayflower, 1962) p. 27.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 26.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 36.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 58.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 43.

race. In *Mutant*, it's only the maladjusted and paranoid who long for power over the normal humans.

In the first story, "The Piper's Son," Kuttner and Moore cleverly domesticate this ideological conflict by focusing on the increasingly strained relationship between an adult Baldy and his son. This is notable for being the first time we've seen intergenerational conflict between two generations of mutants; in all of the other novels studied so far, the intergenerational conflict has been between the superchild and un-super adults. As mentioned earlier, the father, Burkhalter is typical of the adult Baldies who hide in plain sight and try not to ruffle the feathers of the unmutated humans around them. His son, however, is increasingly impatient with his father's ideas, classifying the humans as "dumb," and the Baldies as "afraid."³⁸ He sees the Baldies as superior, and wonders why they don't take control. The conflict is therefore cast in terms familiar from real life, namely, the adult's wish for stability versus the child's impetuous wish for action.

In the end of the story, it emerges that younger generation's ideology is not of their own making. Burkhalter's son, along with the other Baldy children in the town, have fallen under the spell of a "mindcast," which tells the story of a hairless hero called The Green Man. Burkhalter had assumed the stories were just his son's daydreams, but in reality "The Green Man's adventures are propaganda aimed at enticing the young Baldies to see themselves a separate from and superior to non-telepathic humanity."³⁹ The "mindcast" originates with a paranoid Baldy called Venner, whom Burkhalter and the other adult Baldies kill in order to free their children from his dangerous influence. The story thus diffuses the intergenerational conflict, while making clear that the true enemy of the mutants is their "paranoid" brothers who imagine themselves to be superior.

³⁸ Lewis Padgett, *Mutant*, p. 20.

³⁹ Brian Attebery, "Super Men", p. 68.

As well as critiquing the notion that supermen are born to rule, *Mutant* also offers a criticism of the kind of father worship evident in *Slan*. In a neat piece of foreshadowing towards the final reveal of the Green Man's propagandic nature, Kuttner and Moore have Burkhalter and a colleague discussing Nazi Germany: "The Germans worshipped the house tyrant, not the mother, and they had extremely strong family ties. . . They symbolized Hitler as their All-Father, and so eventually we got the Blowup."⁴⁰ The Green Man himself acts as a similar symbol for the young Baldies, the "lure to catch the young fish whose plastic minds were impressionable enough to be led along the roads of dangerous madness."⁴¹ Far from being the positive ideal it was in *Slan*, father worship in *Mutant* leads to madness at best, and at worst, to nuclear annihilation.

Writing about *Slan*, Lester Del Ray described the novel as "one of the very few early superman stories which did not negate the value of superpowers by having the hero fail in the end."⁴² For him, "a true superman, if such there might be, should at least be able to cope with the world a bit better than normal man and have some survival value."⁴³ The question is, how does the superman cope with the world? For Campbell, the answer would be to take power from his inferiors, but *Mutant* offers another strategy. As Knight says: "If a superman really is a superman, he ought to be able to neutralise the natural hostility of normal men enough to get along; this is the point made by Kuttner in the Baldy series and neglected by everyone else, from Stapledon to van Vogt."⁴⁴ *Mutant* therefore stands as a decidedly original entry into the canon of superchild literature, depicting intergenerational conflict between mutants based on ideology, and cleverly subverting the Campbellian idea of the superman while dressing up in its clothes.

⁴⁰ Lewis Padgett, *Mutant*, p. 28.

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 31.

⁴² Lester Del Ray, *The World of Science Fiction*, p. 98.

⁴³ Ibid, p. 337.

⁴⁴ Damon Knight, *In Search of Wonder*, p. 150.

Another story by Kuttner and Moore, *Mimsy Were the Borogroves* (1943), also represents a highly original take on the superchild motif. It was Kuttner and Moore's second story in *Astounding*, after being drafted in by Campbell from its sister magazine, *Unknown*, to make up the shortfall caused by losing writers to the war effort. Its originality lies less in how its superchildren relate to the unevolved society, and more in how they are created in the first place. The radiation fallout of *Mutant* would go on to become something of a cliché of science fiction, especially after World War II. Likewise, evolutionary jumps and alien interventions were already common tropes. Kuttner and Moore avoided all of these clichés, and instead imagined their superchildren being created by educational toys of the future. We can see, then, that right from the start, Kuttner and Moore were fulfilling Campbell's desire for superchild stories, but in a way that was particularly idiosyncratic.

The toys in *Mimsy* are sent back in time by a scientist of the future. He uses them as the test subject for his new time machine because they were the closest thing to hand. Also, his son no longer needs them as he is "conditioned, and had put away childish things."⁴⁵ This idea of conditioning is central to *Mimsy*. In the present day, a young boy, Scott, along with his little sister, Emma, finds the toys and begin playing with them, and soon their minds start to run on different grooves to those of the adults around them. A psychologist that the children's worried parents call in says that "our minds, conditioned to Euclid, can see nothing in this but an illogical tangle of wires. But a child – especially a baby – might see more . . . a child wouldn't be handicapped by too many preconceived ideas."⁴⁶ The real power of children, then, is their lack of conditioning. Earlier in the story, Scott's father, a philosophy professor, had told his wife that his students are "all at the wrong age. Their habit-patterns,

⁴⁵ Lewis Padgett, "Mimsy Were the Borogroves", *The Science Fiction Hall of Fame*, ed. Robert Silverberg (New York: Orb, 1998) p. 181.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p. 197.

their methods of thinking, are already laid down.”⁴⁷ This is precisely his problem too. He and his wife are unable to understand the changes occurring in the minds of their children, who can perceive things in the toys that they cannot.

The intergenerational conflict in *Mimsy* is along the same lines as in the other superchild works I have studied, with the children being more powerful than the adults because of the simple fact that they are younger. Indeed, the younger child in *Mimsy* is the more powerful precisely because her mind has received less conditioning. “With less to unlearn, the baby, Emma, becomes the mental leader, and Scott verifies all of his plans through her. The hierarchy of age and power is inverted so that now the least educated member of the Paradine family has the greatest mental potential, thus power.”⁴⁸ Kuttner and Moore carry this idea one step further by framing children as aliens. “A baby is not human,” they say, “An embryo is far less human.”⁴⁹ Because a child’s thought processes become ever more unintelligible as we go down the age scale, younger children are not only more powerful, they are more alien.

In the end, Scott and Emma disappear in front of their father’s eyes, vanishing “in fragments, like thick smoke in the wind . . . in a direction that Paradine could not understand.”⁵⁰ In a bold piece of intertextuality, the children had worked out how to travel through time and space by following the instructions hidden in Lewis Carroll’s *Jabberwocky* (1871). A short section near the end of the story shows Lewis Carroll, or “Uncle Charles,” talking with a young girl on a river bank by the Thames (although not mentioned by name, the girl is almost certainly Alice Liddell). She too has found a box of toys sent from the future in a second experiment, and tells Uncle Charles the lyrics of a song she’s learnt from

⁴⁷ Lewis Padgett, “Mimsy Were the Borogroves,” p. 185.

⁴⁸ Susan Honeyman, “Mutiny by Mutation,” p. 352.

⁴⁹ Lewis Padgett, “Mimsy Were the Borogroves,” p. 192.

⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 209.

one of them. Uncle Charles promises to include it in his book, along with some of the other stories she's told him, and asks what the nonsense lyrics mean. "'It's the way out, I think,'" the girl replies.⁵¹ Although Scott and Emma would later be able to decipher the meaning of the nonsense words, Kuttner and Moore tell us that the girl couldn't use the words herself because "she was already too old," another, final example of the central theme that a child's power lies in their youth and lack of conditioning.⁵²

I will conclude my roundup of the superchild motif in American pulps by looking at two superchild works from 1953. According to Lester Del Ray, "1953 was the high-water mark for science fiction magazines," when "about 36 titles were published, with a total of 174 issues."⁵³ As well as being a high watermark for the amount of magazine science fiction being published in America, 1953 also stands as something of a high watermark for superchild literature. Along with the fix-up of *Mutant* and Clarke's *Childhood's End*, the year saw the publication of two other superchild pieces of very different scope and thematic content.

The first of these is *More Than Human* (1953) by Theodore Sturgeon. It's one of the most distinctive novels in this study, "the best and only book of its kind," in the words of Damon Knight.⁵⁴ Its distinctiveness stems from the collective nature of its superchildren. Although Clarke had used the same idea in *Childhood's End*, the collective being he presented was on a grand, cosmic scale, encompassing every child on Earth under ten. Sturgeon tells a quieter story, presenting a small, ragtag collection of misfits and idiots. They may be "occupants of a slag heap at the edge of mankind," but by pooling their talents they have to the potential to become a superior new being.⁵⁵ Lone, a mute idiot, is the leader of the

⁵¹ Lewis Padgett, "Mimsy Were the Borogroves," p. 207.

⁵² Ibid., p. 207.

⁵³ Lester Del Ray, *The World of Science Fiction*, p. 177.

⁵⁴ Damon Knight, *In Search of Wonder*, p. 115.

⁵⁵ Theodore Sturgeon, *More Than Human*, p. 74.

group, and acts as the “head” of the newly born unit, which Sturgeon terms a *homo gestalt*. The brain of the *homo gestalt* is a sickly infant the children call “Baby,” with a pair of teleporting twins and a telekinetic girl completing the group. Though the *homo gestalt* is “born” in the first part of the book, its progress towards maturity is slow, and its future is uncertain. Baby says: ““We can do practically *anything*, but we most likely won’t . . . we’re a thing, all right, but the thing is an idiot.””⁵⁶

When Lone dies, another social outcast, Gerry takes over as the “head” of the *homo gestalt*. At first things seem positive, and the *gestalt* is a “new, strong, growing thing,” but Gerry’s rough childhood has left him bitter.⁵⁷ He becomes depressed and “childish,” and “his kind of childishness was pretty vicious.”⁵⁸ Faced with his cruelty, the *homo gestalt* starts to deteriorate. Uniquely among the novels in this dissertation, it’s a *non*-super being who rescues the superchildren. Hip Barrows, a soldier whose life and sanity Gerry had cruelly toyed with earlier, realises that Gerry has to learn “something that a computer can’t teach. He’s got to learn to be ashamed.”⁵⁹ Hip thus acts as the final missing part of the *homo gestalt* - its conscience - and his moral influence finally allows the superchildren to achieve full maturity. As soon as Gerry first feels shame for his actions, he hears “silent voices” welcoming him into the ranks of mature *gestalts*, who exist as God-like spectres guiding mankind.⁶⁰

The moral insights that Hip provides are intimately related to the superchildren’s attitude towards normal humanity. Janie, the telekinetic girl responsible for bringing Hip Barrows into the *gestalt* fold, is the first to recognise the need for an ethical code for dealing with humans. On the one hand, she knows that the “you can’t apply the same set of rules to

⁵⁶ Theodore Sturgeon, *More Than Human*, p. 76.

⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 205.

⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 205.

⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 214.

⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 231.

us as you do to ordinary humans; we're just not the same thing!"⁶¹ On the other hand, she knows that "*Homo Gestalt* is something new, something different, something superior. But the parts – the arms, the guts of it, the memory banks . . . they're the same as the step lower, or very little different."⁶² It's this recognition of the superchildren's humanity, rather than its superiority, which is crucial to the *gestalt* reaching maturity. Hip takes Janie's insights and runs with them, teaching Gerry a "reverence for your sources and your posterity."⁶³ The silent voices Gerry hears at the end confirm Janie and Hip's lessons: "multiplicity is our first characteristic; unity our second. As your parts know they are part of you, so must you know that we are part of humanity."⁶⁴ This emphasis on the superchildren's links to the rest of humanity diverges sharply from the attitudes on display in the other novels covered in this dissertation.

In Stapledon's novel, *Odd John* takes the first part of Janie's insight, that the moral codes of normal humans can't be applied to supernormals, and goes no further, concluding only that "superior beings are free from the moral codes of inferior beings."⁶⁵ In *Slan*, normal humans are a nuisance to be dealt with: "no matter how strong the slans become, the problem of what to do with human beings remains a barrier to occupation of the world."⁶⁶ In *Childhood's End*, the great mass of unevolved humanity simply die out, waste matter in the merging of the species with the Overmind. In *More Than Human*, the superchildren are not a superseding species, but the "greatest fulfilment of human potential. As such, *Homo Gestalt* has a moral duty to guide, inspire, and protect *Homo sapiens* -- which is only logical, for

⁶¹ Theodore Sturgeon, *More Than Human*, p. 212.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 212.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 232.

⁶⁵ Eric S. Rabkin, "The Composite Fiction of Olaf Stapledon," p. 245.

⁶⁶ A.E. van Vogt, *Slan*, p. 53.

ordinary human beings are the Gestalt's source material."⁶⁷ It's this recognition of, and reverence for, the superchildren's parent species that makes Sturgeon's novel unique among those studied in this essay.

There are some commonalities between *More Than Human* and the other novels in this study, however, especially in its adherence to the *younger = more powerful* equation. Just as maturity acted as a barrier to understanding for the adults in *Mimsy Was The Borogroves*, advancing age in *More Than Human* brings about the inability to function as a superchild. The teleporting twins find they can no longer hear Baby's thoughts as they used to be able to: "as they grew up they began to lose the knack of it. Every young kid does."⁶⁸ Gerry tells us that "Baby never grew any. Janie did, and the twins, and so did I, but not Baby," and it's because of this that Baby remains the most powerful member of the *gestalt*.⁶⁹ Part of the problem with growing up in *More Than Human* is the need for speech. As outcast children they relied on "bleshing" - their word for telepathic communication - but as they grow up and enter the world they talk more, and their ability to "blesh" suffers. Lone, for example, finds it harder to read the thoughts of infants: "he had begun to be insensitive to it when he began to gain speech."⁷⁰ Another corrupting factor in growing up is the influence of people intent on 'civilising' the young superchildren. Gerry recognises the negative effects of being civilised, and takes the extreme measure of killing Miss Kew, a woman who was looking after them and trying to mould them into normal, respectable children. "'It was self-preservation for the *gestalt*,'" he tells a psychologist, "My *gestalt* organism was at the point of death from that security."⁷¹ Had Sturgeon left it there, we could be forgiven for lumping

⁶⁷ Victoria Strauss, "Review of *More Than Human*", *SF Site* (2000) <<https://www.sfsite.com/08b/mth87.htm>> [accessed 13 May 2019]

⁶⁸ Theodore Sturgeon, *More Than Human*, p. 95.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, p .95.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, p .56.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, p .143.

Gerry et al in with Odd John and his group of cold-blooded killers. The shame Gerry feels at the end of the novel, however, is mainly over his killing of Miss Kew.

Latham tells us that Sturgeon was “the most self-consciously literary, humanistically inclined author in Campbell's stable,” and had never felt truly at home at *Astounding*.⁷² In fact, he “had so many run-ins with the intransigent editor that, once the new markets opened after 1950, he published only one story in *Astounding* during the subsequent decade, compared with scores in other magazines.”⁷³ *More Than Human* is a case in point – its central chapter, “Baby Is Three,” was published as a short story in *Galaxy*, a magazine which emerged as one of *Astounding*'s main competitors from its inception in 1950. It's perhaps no surprise, then, that *More Than Human*'s presentation of the superchildren is about as far from the Campbellian conception of the superman as it's possible to get: there's no singular, born-to-rule hero like Jommy Cross, and instead of gaining power over humanity and ruling them with disdain, the superchildren in *More Than Human* recognise that they *are* humanity in its highest expression, and that their purpose is to protect and nourish their parent species.

Theodore Sturgeon was just one of the writers from Campbell's stable who started to move away from the editor in the 1950s. Some were lured away by new markets with higher pay rates, while others fell out with Campbell over his conversion to L. Ron Hubbard's dianetics, which he believed in wholeheartedly and promoted in *Astounding*. The extent of his influence, and the very existence of a “Golden Age” in science fiction are still hotly debated today. There can be no doubt, though, as to his role in making the mutated superman one of the central tropes of American science fiction. Although writers such as Sturgeon and Kuttner and Moore subverted Campbell's ideas of the superman as much as they promoted

⁷² Rob Latham, “Fiction, 1950-1963 (Part I: History)”, *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*, ed. Mark Bould, Andrew Butler, Adam Roberts, Sherryl Vint (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009) <<https://search.proquest.com/docview/2137944274?accountid=8630>> [accessed 20 April 019]

⁷³ Ibid.

them, they were still writing in a subgenre which owes much of its popularity to his influence as the editor of *Astounding*.

To conclude this chapter, I will now look at one final superchild work published in 1953, Jerome Bixby's short story "It's a *Good Life*" (1953). The superchild it depicts, a three year old boy called Anthony, is one of the most powerful yet seen in this study, being in possession of almost God-like powers. Not only can he read minds, he can make people disappear, control the weather - essentially do anything he wants just by thinking it. Unfortunately for the people around him, Anthony is also the most childlike of all the superchildren, with no compensating super-intelligence or maturity. Despite his unimaginable powers, Anthony is a normative child, with all the pettiness, egocentricity, and tyranny that entails.

Anthony is a figure of horror, and therefore the reader is encouraged to sympathise with the society around him. This society comprises of the forty-six people left in the small village of Peaksville, which floats "like a soul" in a "vast, endless, grey nothingness."⁷⁴ They've been trapped there ever since Anthony was born, when he'd "whined and done the thing. Had taken the village someplace. Or had destroyed the world and left only the village, nobody knew which."⁷⁵ Anthony, like many children, is changeable in his moods, and the villagers live in terror of him overhearing some stray negative thought and punishing them. In the opening scene he snaps a "small, sulky thought," at the delivery man, Bill Soames, but "just a small one, because he was in a good mood today, and besides, he liked Bill Soames, or at least didn't dislike him, at least today."⁷⁶ Bill Soames gets off lightly, with Anthony making his bicycle pedal him off at full speed.

⁷⁴ Jerome Bixby, "It's a *Good Life*", *The Science Fiction Hall of Fame*, ed. Robert Silverberg (New York: Orb, 1998) p. 448.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 448.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 435.

Anthony's actions are just as bad when he tries to help. He "mightn't actually mean any harm, he couldn't be expected to have much notion of what was the right thing to do in such cases."⁷⁷ This inability of a child to recognise the consequences of his actions leads to some horrifying situations, like Anthony bringing back a woman's husband from the dead because he overheard her mourning.

Because the reader's sympathies are with the society around the superchild, "It's a *Good Life*" stands as a very different kind of story from the others of the pulp era, in which the *Slan*, *Baldies* and *Homo Gestalt* are all offered up as objects for our sympathy, and we take their side against the societies that persecute them. The enrolment of the reader's sympathies in those works is heightened by seeing the world through the eyes of the superchildren. In "It's a *Good Life*," however, we mainly see the action of the story through the eyes of the terrified villagers. A brief dip into Anthony's point of view only serves to increase our horror. He spends time by a watering hole frequented by wildlife, listening to their instinctive desires and sating them. "He liked to help them. He liked to feel their simple gratification." When he catches the thoughts of one animal about to pounce on another and eat it, he banishes it from sight. "He didn't like those kind of thoughts," Bixby tells us. The above neatly encapsulates the horror in "It's a *Good Life*," which lies in the pairing of awesome powers with the binary, Good/Bad, and Like/Dislike mind of an infant. In real life, we are used to being able to control the unruly child, and can have nothing but sympathy for the adults in "It's a *Good Life*," who are subject to the little tyrant's every whim.

⁷⁷ Jerome Bixby, "It's a *Good Life*," p. 434.

Conclusion

In the early chapters of *The Food of the Gods*, before the emergence of the giant children, Wells describes the boom food getting loose in the Kent countryside, which is soon overrun by giant rats and wasps. This is in keeping with his earlier scientific romances, which Suvin says often portray an “exalting of the humble into horrible masters.”¹ This idea is also at the heart of the superchild motif which, as I have shown, concerns the exalting of the humble child into a superman. All of the authors covered in this dissertation have used their exalted children for different ends. British authors used them to issue pleas for “mystery” or unity, or to explore philosophical concepts, or shake people out of their complacency. American writers used them to support or critique Campbell’s idea of the superman or, in Bixby’s case, to instil fear in the reader.

Bixby’s story can be seen as an early pointer in the direction that the superchild would start to travel, away from the noble, persecuted mutant of the Campbell era, and away from the transcendental superchild of British scientific romance, and towards the superchild as monstrous persecutor. Pringle et. al. tell us that the “purely monstrous child became a cliché of horror fiction, especially in the 1980s, a decade when, perhaps for some as-yet-undiagnosed sociological reason, sf itself showed a distinct falling off in the number of stories devoted to superchildren.”² It’s telling that of all of the works studied in this dissertation, Bixby’s story is perhaps the one that’s enjoyed the longest, and most diverse afterlife. The story is regularly anthologised and was adapted into a *Twilight Zone* episode,

¹ Darko Suvin, “Introduction,” p. 25.

² David Pringle, Peter Nicholls and David Langford, “Children in SF”, *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* eds. John Clute, David Langford, Peter Nicholls and Graham Sleight (London: Gollancz, updated 11 August 2018)
<http://www.sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/children_in_sf>[accessed 12 November 2018]

itself parodied in a Halloween episode of *The Simpsons*.³ I'd argue that its persistence in popular culture is mainly due to its explicitly horrific nature, which fits with the trend Pringle et. al. noted above. While works like *More Than Human* and *Childhood's End* are still appreciated by genre fans and a general readers, they arguably don't have the same popular appeal as chilling tales of unsettling infants.

For all this, less explicitly horrific superchildren do still appear in popular culture, such as Alton in *Midnight Special* (2016) and Eleven in *Stranger Things*, to give just two modern examples.⁴ They also cropped up in David Bowie's 'Oh! You Pretty Things,' which provided me with a title for this dissertation:

Look out at your children,
See their faces in golden rays,
Don't kid yourself they belong to you,
They're the start of a coming race,
The earth is a bitch, we've finished our news,
Homo sapiens have outgrown their use.⁵

The chorus ends with the same message extolled by almost all of my chosen authors in this dissertation, a reminder that current humanity is not a fixed thing, and when the time comes, "You gotta make way for the Homo Superior."⁶

³ *It's a Good Life* (*The Twilight Zone: Season 3, Episode 8*), (New York: CBS, 3 November 1961); *Treehouse of Horror II* (*The Simpsons: Season 3, Episode 7*), (New York: Fox, October 31, 1991).

⁴ *Midnight Special*, dir. by Jeff Nichols (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2016); *Stranger Things*, Netflix, July 15, 2016 – present.

⁵ 'Oh! You Pretty Things' in *Hunky Dory* (London: Trident Studios, 1971)

⁶ Ibid.

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